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MIKE SHAYNE

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by Brett Halliday

THE KILLERS OF SANTA CRUZ

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NOV.-DEC. 1977
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NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

IT HAD TO BE MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

When, through a third party, Shayne's old enemy, Chief Peter Painter, asks the redhead for help, Shayne is at first tempted to turn him down. But when the murdered body of Miami Beach Detective Herky Byles lands at the redhead's feet, Shayne no longer has an option to turn Painter down—for they are working opposite sides of the same murderous street 2 to 49

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IT HAD TO BE MURDER

by Brett Halliday

The last thing Shayne wanted to do was to pull Peter Painter's chestnuts out of the fire. But for the fee Triple-A Insurance was paying, the Miami redhead swallowed his pride.

MIKE SHAYNE LOOKED AT Chief Gentry as he sat behind his desk. The detective's grey eyes expressed near-total disbelief. He said, "Will, you can't be serious!"

The Miami chief of police folded his hands, cocked his massive head slightly to one side and said, "I've never been more serious in my life."

"But why should Peter Painter turn to *me*? He's been riding my rump every time I cross the bay for more years than I care to remember. He's been after my license ever since he graduated from harness bull to detective third class. Now you tell me he wants me to

work for him. Don't tell me it isn't a setup."

Chief Gentry rubbed his forehead, then sighed and said, "I don't blame you for being cynical, Mike. I'm not even going to sound off over your implication that I would be party to a setup." He folded his hands again, added, "Chief Painter is turning to you because I suggested it."

"Thanks a lot!" said the Miami redhead.

"I just told you I don't blame you for being cynical, *Mr. Shayne*." The grey-haired chief's voice hardened. "Now shut up and listen. Painter is turning to you because he

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needs an outsider to clean up a case for him."

"What about his own men?" Shayne asked. "I may not be Petey's great and good friend, but he has a few good ones—Deblin, Lovejoy, Hyams, even that dumb ox Bolton. What's the matter with *them*?"

"Nothing as far as I know." Chief Gentry held up a hand to keep the detective quiet. "Chief Painter simply doesn't feel he can trust *anybody* just now."

"So. Petey's finally gone paranoid." Shayne shook his red head in mock distress.

"It's not funny, Mike. When a chief of police knows somebody on his force has been bought and doesn't know who, he's in deep trouble... and so is the community he is sworn to serve. I've been there, too—not in a long, long time, thank God. But I've been there. Take it from me, it's enough to make anyone paranoid."

"But why *me*?" Shayne repeated. "Why not give him a hand with some of your own boys?"

"Because they're all known in Miami Beach."

"And I'm *not*?"

"Not as an under-cover cop," Gentry told him.

"Good God!" Shayne exhaled through his lips. "What is it, by the way—the luxury hotel ripoffs?"

"You know about those?" Will Gentry's bushy eyebrows rose a notch. "They've been kept out of the news media. How?"

"Our mutual friend Tim Rourke for one, Will. The press may have kept mum but don't think they're not primed to go the minute the lid comes off. It was Tim who hung the 'luxury hotel ripoff' handle on them."

"How much do you know?"

"Eight six-figure thefts in less than two weeks," Shayne replied. "In six different hotels. No tie-ins, no clues except the victims were rich. You know where I'm due right now? Triple-A Insurance."

"They're putting you on it?"

"I'm already on it. So if that's Petey's problem—and it damn near has to be—how in hell can I help him?"

"By finding out who's behind it—and what his tie-ins are with the Miami Beach Police Force."

"But, Will," Shayne protested, "my assignment is to recover the stolen property even if I have to set up a deal."

Gentry nodded, said, "I'm not exactly wet behind the ears, Mike. But if, in the course of your investigation, you do get a lead on any sellout cops, give Chief Painter a ring."

"What's in it for me?" The detective's grey eyes narrowed.

"Under the circumstances you've just told me, nothing."

"Okay." Mike Shayne rose abruptly. "But tell Petey I won't play ball unless he keeps off my neck while I'm operating in his jurisdiction. And, Will, *I'm not kidding!*"

The grizzled Miami Chief of Police shook his head and half-smiled as the redhead strode from his office. Then he picked up a desk telephone and told the operator, "Get me Chief Painter—the private line." . . .

The office of All-American Amalgamated Insurance Corporation Claims Director for Southern Florida, Angus MacLynn, was high in one of those tubular glass-and-steel towers that have been sprouting like asparagus in America's major cities since the mid-Sixties. Its panoramic view of the massive resort crenelations of Miami Beach, with Biscayne Bay in the foreground, was breathtaking.

MacLynn was short, stocky, soft-spoken, middle aged, a man born to rumpled tweeds in a chillier clime. He smoked a briar pipe with a silver-banded curved stem which he removed as Mike Shayne was ushered in by a pants-suited receptionist.

After greeting the detective with quiet warmth, he nodded toward his desk, said, "There's all the information we have,

Mr. Shayne. I only hope it helps."

"So do I," the redhead replied. MacLynne handed him a folder as he sat down, perched on a corner of his desk, puffed on his pipe.

"Frankly," he said, "we're up the wall. Eight robberies—eight major thefts—and the only thing that links them is that they're all covered by Triple-A. It gives one to think."

"It does indeed," Shayne agreed. "You don't suppose—"

MacLynne cut him off. "We've supposed everything. But what it boils down to is—why us?"

"Not to mention who and how."

The claims director nodded. He hesitated briefly, then said, "I know your reputation for working alone, Mr. Shayne, but in view of the circumstances, we've decided to offer you a company operative as a sort of co-partner—just in case the leads should turn our way. Which I devoutly hope they don't."

"I prefer to pick my own associates." Shayne kept his tone mild but was definitely defensive.

"You're quite free to work independently," MacLynne assured him. "That's understood. But your partner will be available at all times, if needed."

He must have pressed a buzzer under his desk because, just as the detective was about to register further objections, a stunning blonde breezed into the office, wearing a jacaranda blue dress that clung to slimly stimulating legs and body and matched exactly the eyes that regarded him from beneath gently arched brows two shades darker than the shoulder length hair that framed her face.

"This," said MacLynne, "is Special Claims Agent Diana Lee—Mike Shayne. Don't let her looks deceive you, Mr. Shayne—Diana's just about the best we've got."

"With those looks," said the redhead, "Miss Lee is free to deceive me anytime." Things, he decided, were looking up—decidedly.

"I've heard a great deal about you, Mr. Shayne." Her voice was softly Southern, the hand she offered cool, smooth and, like her face, suntanned.

"Georgia?" he asked.

"Alabama—Mobile."

II

THEY DINED THAT EVENING, on her suggestion, in the Fauberg Room of the Mirabeau, one of the newer hotels on Collins Avenue. As the parking attendant drove Shayne's Buick from

under the porte cochere of the hotel, Shayne spotted Detective Herky Byles of Chief Peter Painter's Miami Beach Police Force standing just outside the gilt-and-glass front doors of the hotel, hands thrust in the trouser pockets of his rumpled grey flannel slacks.

Byles, his attention held by the beauty of Shayne's spectacular companion, did not see the redhead until they were almost by him. When the detective greeted him with a, "Hiya, Herk," Styles started, gulped, uttered a, "Huh?" and looked embarrassed.

Shayne wondered why, then forgot about it as they settled at their table and got about the business of ordering drinks, then dinner. He had his usual Martell on the rocks. Diana, he noted with approval, settled for Black Label and water, which she downed without a tremor, another plus.

They dined on cold vichyssois, filet de boeuf Wellington, rissolé potatoes, asparagus with drawn sweet butter and a slice of Nesselrode pie. She drank a Nuits St. Georges while he stuck to cognac. Other plusses for Diana—she liked her beef blood rare and said nothing about worry over her figure, which needed none.

The music was stimulating but soft enough so they could

talk without shouting. Despite the romantic setting, the conversation was almost strictly business.

Speaking of her boss, she said, "Mac plays it cool, but these robberies have him really uptight. Not that the company can't stand the loss if it comes to that, but why Triple-A should be the sole target. He's beginning to see inside thieves under every carpet."

Shayne considered the parallel paranoias of Angus MacLynne and Peter Painter on this same matter of the thefts, said, "It doesn't necessarily mean anyone in the company is selling out. You know as well as I do that, in this goofed-up electronic age, almost anybody can get almost any information about anyone else. Maybe, somehow, they latched onto a Triple-A actuarial sheet listing and decided to run through that before they hit another company."

"I know," Diana said. "So does Mac. But we both have a gut feeling . . ." She let it hang.

He ran over in his mind the folder information MacLynne had given him that afternoon . . .

Mrs. Theresa Almont of Rosemont PA—emerald-and-diamond necklace, brooch, bracelet and earrings, insured for \$280,000



Miss Theodora Jensen of Biloxi MI—one 50-carat diamond ring and a gold-mesh-and-diamond evening bag, insured for \$190,000

Alderton Thomas of Lake Forest IL—two sets of diamond-and-sapphire evening studs and cufflinks, insured for \$135,000

Mrs. Elinor Post-Davisson of Pasadena CA—diamond tiara and necklace, insured for \$300,000

Miss Virginia Catesby Cadwallader of Tuxedo Park NY—

twin ruby, pearl and diamond brooches and a matching collar and bracelets, insured for \$155,000

Miss Alison Deane of San Francisco CA—six Bengal elephants of 24-Karat gold encrusted with brilliants, insured for \$240,000

Mrs. Miriam Jones Ellerbe of Houston TE—a golden Byzantine ikon of solid gold with St. Eustatius emblazoned in diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and pearls en route to heaven, insured for \$275,000

Philip Ormsby Klezwewski of Denver CO—a solid platinum wristwatch with diamond hour markers and crystal of single diamond, insured for \$115,000

The total insurance outlay ran to \$1,680,000. Not exactly another sinking of the *Titanic* in payouts, but large enough to cause many understandable headaches. He wondered why anyone would want to travel to Florida with six Bengal elephants or St. Eustatius in the act of being martyred, why owners did not follow the advice of their insurance brokers and keep their valuables in a bank vault.

Probably, he thought, because the sort of persons who went for such flamboyant items were the sort who liked to show them off.

As if she were following the

same thought line, Diana said over their after-dinner brandies, "I still think people are crazy to risk such things in travel. If they didn't, their rates would be a lot lower."

"True—but us private detectives would be out of a very profitable portion of our business."

At that moment—it was 10:11 exactly by the redhead's wristwatch—every light in the *Tauberg Room* went out.

There was no panic—merely a murmur of voices, a scattering of what-the-hells, a quickly smothered giggle. The detective heard the girl in his banquette utter a soft, "Well, well . . ."

Shayne said nothing, but the computer that was his brain was working on all circuits. Nothing definite, of course. The previous thefts had been committed without theatrics of any sort. When a victim left her room, the valuables were wherever they had been placed, either in a bureau drawer, on a closet shelf or still in trunk or suitcase.

When the victim came back to the room, the valuables were gone. No fuss, no violence, no evidence of entry—and, to date, no feelers for an under-the-table return deal to insurance company or owner.

The *Fauberg Room* blackout was definitely out of character

for this string of larcenies? Or was it...?

Suppose something had gone wrong, suppose in that case the burglary team had a method of flicking off the hotel's electricity... a possibility. And why of all places had Herky Byles in his rumpled grey flannels been hanging around the entrance of the Mirabeau? Why had he blushed when he saw Shayne? And wasn't it exceedingly providential, if the hotel were the stage for a ninth grand theft, that Diana Lee should have brought them here for dinner?

Without a word to his partner, Mike Shayne slipped out of the banquette and, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, moved swiftly toward the lobby, which was dimly lighted by the street lamps and the illumination of the towering Ronsard Inn across Collins Avenue.

Unlike the room he had just left, the lobby itself was in considerable confusion. Two women collided a few feet to his left with a soft *thump* followed by cries of alarm. A new arrival at the desk, turning quickly to see what had happened, fell over his own luggage, taking a bellboy with him. There was a loud crash of breaking glass somewhere nearby.

Mike Shayne knew better than to try to unearth his Buick from the blacked-out

labyrinth of the basement garage. Even if the lights fortunately came on, he had no idea where to look for it.

If his gut feeling were correct, if the blackout had been set to cover another theft, somebody, he reasoned, would be leaving the Mirabeau in a hurry. Out of long habit, the detective had eyed the entrances as he drove Diana up to the hotel, had noted that the service entrance ramp gaped alongside the guests' garage ramp.

The redhead could not be certain that there was no other means of getting out of the hotel, but he calculated that, if he could get out on the sidewalk, at least he might catch a glimpse of anyone who did emerge. Slim, but definitely a chance worth taking...

Collins Avenue seemed bright as high noon after the darkness of the Mirabeau. Traffic was all but halted as those driving slowly by slowed further still to regard the sudden blackout of the big hotel. But there was no sign or sound of an alarm.

Mike Shayne moved swiftly toward the rank of taxicabs waiting in line in front of the hotel, on the opposite side of the porte cochere from the two ramps and facing them. Three cars, all luxury models were in

the porte cochere itself, along with another taxi someone had evidently called for since no one was emerging from it.

He opened the passenger door of the first cab in line, was greeted by a growled, "Sorry, I'm taken, bud," to be followed by a, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Shayne."

"Sit tight, Maxie," said the redhead, recognizing the driver. A glance at his watch revealed the time as 10:13.

"Something up, Mr. Shayne?" the Jehu asked.

"Don't know yet," the redhead replied.

His words might have been a trigger. Hardly had he uttered them when a trio of unmistakable small-arms shots sounded from somewhere above them. There was a second crash of glass and, leaping from the vehicle, Shayne saw a body pinwheeling down toward the sidewalk to land with a sickening crunch a mere fifteen feet from where the detective stood with one leg still inside the cab.

There were outcries now, and screeching of brakes. A headlight passed over the body on the concrete, which looked like a heap of discarded clothing—gray flannel clothing—or a collapsed scarecrow.

Somewhere in the near distance, a police whistle shrilled and men cried out and women

screamed as a pool of blood, black in the head-lights, began to spread on the sidewalk beneath the body of Miami Beach Police Detective Herky Byles.

"Hang in, Maxie. I'm going to have a look." Shayne took a half dozen steps toward the corpse when a black sedan seemed to burst out of the hotel service ramp.

His first thought was that whoever was in it would not get far through the traffic that clogged the avenue. His second was less thought than a leap of self preservation as the sedan, with a double screech of brakes and tires, swung abruptly left along the sidewalk, coming straight for the redhead, who barely made the curb in time as it further pulverized the already broken body of Herky Byles.

"Try to follow!" Mike Shayne shouted as he scrambled back inside the cab. He reached for his shoulder holster as Maxie momentarily stalled climbing the curb, realized he had left his Colt .45 in the Buick parked in the basement garage below.

The cab jolted forward and turned and somebody made the other cab door and half-fell inside. A voice said, "Maybe you'd better take mine."

Diana Lee was in the taxi with him, offering him a small

revolver drawn from her open handbag . . .

III

THE BLACK SEDAN cut left into a service alley beyond the northern wall of the hotel, still peeling rubber, a hundred feet ahead of Maxie's creaking cab. The swell of sirens behind them was cut by a sudden series of tinny crashes as the fleeing vehicle careened through a platoon of empty trash cans, which all but halted the cab's pursuit.

At alley's end, the black sedan turned right and increased its lead by half as Shayne disentangled his limbs from those of Diana Lee and, during the following turn, managed to get in two shots at it with the revolver the girl had handed him. The sedan's right rear tire blew with an echoing report and it swerved against a steel link fence with a screech of metal, bounced off and kept on going.

"*Beautiful!*" the girl said softly. "*Beautiful!*"

"Bull luck," Shayne replied. "Oh-oh— For God's sake, *watch it, Maxie!*"

The black sedan sped limping through an intersecting alley just ahead of a police car that entered it from the left, blocking pursuit. Maxie braked desperately but was unable to

avoid all contact. Only by the most skillful wheel-jockeying was he able to avoid T-boning the black-and-white. They came to a shuddering halt with a gentle crunch, winding up with hopelessly locked bumpers.

Mike Shayne burst out of the taxi and tried for another shot. Over the hood of the police car, he saw the black sedan careen into the wall of another hotel to be stopped cold. Three figures piled out of it into the glare of a street lamp, then melted into the darkness.

"*Drop that gun!*"

An angry officer, who had jumped from the black-and-white, was covering him with a .357 Magnum, whose slightly flared barrel looked to the redhead like the muzzle of a blunderbuss. He had no choice but to obey, let the girl's revolver drop to the uneven alley pavement.

"Hands on the roof, both of you." The driver of the police car had joined his partner, also with Magnum ready. Maxie lined up with him, muttering, "Jesus, pal! Someday maybe I can do you a favor."

"It's okay, Maxie," Shayne assured him.

"Clam up," one of the officers said.

He was relieved of his wallet after being frisked for further firearms and a policeman said,

"My God! We got Mike Shayne."

"Who's he?" said the other.

"Never mind," replied the first. "Chief Painter is gonna be very pleased." . . .

Pleased was not in Shayne's estimation the sort of expression Miami Beach's chief of police was wearing when the redhead was ushered into his immaculate office. Wary fitted it better.

Everything about Peter Painter was immaculate, from the impeccable part in his coal-black hair to the glittering shine on his pointed black shoes with the heel lifts that added two inches to the five feet five nature had given him. The ends of his carefully waxed mustache seemed to quiver as he studied the detective with onyx-dark eyes that glittered in the cold fluorescent light.

Hefting the revolver his men had taken from the detective, he said, looking up at Shayne's six-two, "Where in hell did you get this Tinkertoy piece, Shayne?"

"Don't knock it, Petey," said the redhead. "At least it stopped the sedan. If your boys in blue hadn't blundered into us, it might have stopped a fugitive or two."

"That's not the way I heard it," Painter snapped. "Where did you get the gun?"

"Believe it or not, Petey, it was a present from a friend—the young lady I was dining with when the Mirabeau blacked out."

"And that's something else," Painter growled. "Just how did you happen to be in that particular hotel at that particular time on this particular evening?"

"That," Shayne replied, "is a very good question—one whose answer I intend to find out myself."

"Stop trying to T-O me, Shayne. I want a few answers."

"So do I, Petey. So do I. In fact, I'm still looking for a few questions. Like—what in hell was Herky Byles doing at the Mirabeau this evening?"

Painter winced as if Mike Shayne had stuck a needle into his rump. Then he handed the detective Diana Lee's revolver butt first, walked around his desk and dropped into the triple cushioned chair behind it.

After sticking the gold-plated little weapon in his belt, the redhead sat in the chair opposite, noting that the usually aggressive chief of police looked drawn and tired, as if he had aged ten years in the ten or so days since Shayne had last seen him. His skin reminded Shayne of a wrinkled sheet of parchment drawn tautly over the bones beneath.

He said, "Byles had a tip the thieves had the Mirabeau marked for a hit tonight. Poor bastard—he was one of the few men on my team I could still trust—much as I hate to say it. Gentry says he talked to you this afternoon."

The redhead nodded, feeling almost sympathetic toward his long-time foe, said, "Will seemed to think maybe we could walk parallel lines in this business."

"He says you left it open." There was pathetic eagerness underlying the statement, eagerness that made it almost a plea.

"I told him I'd play ball if you'd stay off my neck," the detective said quietly. "You don't seem to have got a very good start on that, Petey."

"Have a heart, Shayne." The plea was in the open now. "What else could those boys do but stop you? They were answering a block-off call to cordon the Mirabeau—and your cab rammed them in the alley and you started shooting. What else could they do?"

"Okay." Shayne relented. "We'll let that one go. But go easy on Maxie Winkler. He was trying to help me catch those bums."

"What happened to the girl who gave you the gun?"

"Evidently, she took off."

"Who is she?" Painter asked.

Shayne told him, added, "I wasn't T-O-ing you when I said I intended to find out why we were at the Mirabeau. It was her idea. I thought it was just her notion of a nice place to dine—until the blackout. After that, there was no chance to talk."

Chief Painter nodded. "She works for Triple-A? What's her name?"

Shayne told him and the chief wrote it down, remarked, "We'll talk to her. Maybe . . ." He let it hang.

"Any idea where Byles got his tip?" Shayne asked.

Painter shook his head slowly, said, "Byles kept his sources covered. You know, Shayne . . ."

"Tough," said the detective. "Petey, what makes you think your force has gone on the take? You and I may have had our problems, but I respect your operation."

"Thanks, Shayne." The little Miami Beach chief adjusted the blotter on his desk a fraction of an inch, looked up, added, "It's not the force, just two or three men. The hell of it is, I have no way of knowing which two or three. *Somebody's* got to be helping these ripoff men."

"Until tonight, they've always hit us where we ain't. Thanks to Byles' tip, I thought maybe

we'd break it tonight. That's why I wanted you here."

"As Byles' backup?"

Painter nodded. "It had to be somebody I could trust—and in spite of all the corners you've cut, Shayne, you're not exactly the jewel thieves' best friend."

"That's very touching, Petey." Shayne felt his hackles rise at the southpaw compliment.

"Don't blow your top, Shayne. You saw what happened to Byles tonight."

"Why didn't he give me a nod when he saw me enter the hotel?" Shayne asked.

"Because he wanted to bust this one himself."

"A glory hog?"

"Maybe . . ." Painter hesitated, then, "Or maybe he just wanted the personal satisfaction of nailing these thieves. Remember, he was down eight to zilch on this one."

The redhead nodded slowly, said, "Poor bastard." He knew how Byles must have felt, while the thieves were thumbing their noses at him and he was unable to do a thing about it. Shayne said, "Didn't you talk it over with him, Petey?"

"Sure. I rode him pretty damned hard about it. Shayne, you know the sort of place Miami Beach is—a major resort community. We have to wink at a lot of things Will Gentry would crack down on. Like let-

ting top underworld figures live here without harassment as long as they keep their noses clean. Whores, gays, you name it—as long as they've got the class and the money to spend and don't make trouble. The Beach depends on the hotels for its existence."

"And its revenue," the redhead put in.

"Right." Painter nodded. "And a string of successful heists like these are just the sort of thing the hotel managements and their guests can do without. They're riding my can hard—and what happened tonight isn't going to make them let up."

"What was stolen?" Shayne asked.

"Apparently nothing. Byles seems to have been waiting for them to enter the suite of a rich old broad from Seattle. Seems she had about two hundred grand in diamonds in her bureau drawer."

Shayne picked it up. "And somehow he tipped them he was there and the shooting started and he went out the window."

"That's about the way it looks. You didn't get a look at those goons you were chasing, did you?"

The detective shook his red head. "Not a chance, Petey. First I was trying to keep from

getting hit by their car, then I was behind them. They could have been dykes in drag for all I know."

"That's not funny, Shayne." Painter's mustache ends appeared to bristle.

"I know it, Petey. I wonder who carried the insurance load on the old girl's diamonds."

"I'll give you one guess. And that's another freak angle—all the hits being on Triple-A liabilities."

"Why do you think they hired me?" Shayne countered.

"Any leads?" Painter asked.

Shayne shook his head again, said, "They only got in touch with me yesterday. I've hardly been briefed."

"Okay, that's your end of things then. I'll do what I can at this end. For God's sake, let me know if you come up with anything. There's got to be a tie-in with Triple-A."

"You'll be the second to know, Petey."

"After your client?"

"After my client." Shayne got up as Painter rose.

"That seems to be that then—for now. Need a lift back to your car?"

"Thanks, Petey, I'll take a cab. Remember, keep your boys off my back."

"The word's already been given."

Shayne nodded and flipped



two fingers in farewell salute. He and Painter might be allies for the moment, but the redhead found it impossible to give thanks or accept the favor of a lift in a Painter police car.

IV

WHEN THE REDHEAD REACHED the Mirabeau, the hotel and its visible inmates appeared as unruffled as if no violence had taken place on the premises less than two hours before. Even the blood on the sidewalk where Detective Herky Byles died had been hosed away. Shayne

handed his parking check to a uniformed attendant and was waiting under the porte cochere for it to be brought up from the garage when he felt a gentle tug at his elbow.

It was Diana Lee, looking as sleek and chic as the immediate environment. She said, "It's a nice night for murder, Michael Shayne. May I please have my gun back?"

As the detective returned her weapon, he said, "I owe you a couple of bullets."

"Don't worry, Shayne." Her quick smile was dazzling even in the dim lighting of the porte cochere. "I'm glad you got some use out of it. If that fuzzmobile hadn't cut us off, you probably would have caught them right then."

"Maybe." The redhead shrugged. "You didn't get a look at any of them, did you?"

"Not very much. The one who came out first was a big, thickset man with a hook for a nose. I didn't see the other two—did you?"

Mike Shayne shook his head. "Not a chance. How did you manage to pull that vanishing act, Lee?"

"The old magician's trick—diversion of interest. It seemed like a good idea to split the scene while those two boys in blue had their attention focused on you and Maxie. I got out

the other door and hit the cross street behind the black-and-white and walked around the block to the hotel."

"You're a damned cool cat," The redhead's voice was tinged with admiration.

Diana smiled, said, "I was all right as long as I kept moving. But when I got inside the lobby, my legs turned to rubber. I couldn't get out of my chair for ten minutes by the clock over the desk."

"You've been waiting here all this time?"

"Not just waiting. I flashed my Triple-A card to get a look at the room where the shooting took place. It's on the third floor—belongs to a Mr. and Mrs. Howard Leviton of Seattle. They were having dinner with friends in Bal Harbour, the Jeremy Falters. Know them?"

"No." Shayne shook his head. "But I will."

The Buick rolled up then and, moments later, the big redhead toolled the special car into the lessening night traffic. As he headed for the MacArthur Causeway, he said, "Pick up anything else?"

"Not much—apart from the fact that Triple-A has a policy on Mrs. Leviton's diamonds."

"I got that much from Peter Painter. So tell me this, Lee—are we dealing with two separate cases of corruption here?"

The Miami Beach Police Force and Triple-A?"

"It looks like it. Somebody has to be taking aim at the company with inside help. That's why I was sent here—to probe the local bureau. Normally, I work out of the New York office."

"That's why I haven't seen you before—and believe me, I would have noticed."

"Careful, Shayne." Her tone was light but definite. "My options are all taken up. And what about that famous faithful secretary of yours?"

"Lucy? She's a great gal." He sighed. "You have a point though. Oh, well, forget it. We seem to have bought enough trouble as is. Tell me this—would it be possible for someone to get at your account lists?"

"These 'lists' as you call them, Shayne, are all banked in our corporate computer in Hartford," she said. "Of course, somebody *could* dig them out via local agents, maybe local gossip. But he'd have to travel all over the country to do it."

"Or have contacts in a lot of cities to find out who has big jewelry insured at Triple-A... people who are coming to Miami Beach at this time."

"I suppose it's possible." She sounded doubtful.

"Doubtful—but just possible."

Shayne shafted a quick look at her perfect profile. "Something else is bothering me, Lee—what made you pick the Mirabeau for dinner tonight?"

"I've been waiting for that," she replied. "In fact, I've been knocking my brains out over it ever since I could think again after the shooting." A pause, then, "It was a girl at the office, and she didn't exactly tell me. She was on the phone and I heard her say it was one of the nicest places here, the Fauberg Room... Don't think I'm not going to dig into *that* tomorrow."

"Lots of luck." His personal jury was still out on Diana Lee. She was shrewd, she was beautiful, she was brave—which meant to him that she was either one of the best insurance investigators alive or one of the most dangerous of thieves. Perhaps both. Like her, he intended to find out.

Traffic on the causeway was light, and Shayne noted a car that hung three to four vehicles behind them, now moving closer, now moving back. The red hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Leaning forward, he opened the special dashboard compartment within which lay the Colt .45 the big detective had missed so sorely earlier in the evening.

Driving one-handed, the de-

TECTIVE retrieved the weapon and laid it across his lap.

"Shall I get mine out, too?" Diana asked him quietly.

"Not yet," he replied. "This is just in case."

"I take it," she said, "that we have picked up a caudal appendage."

"If you mean a tail, you're right on. I'll know for sure when he leaves the causeway."

Lighting a cigaret with steady fingers, Diana said, "I'll say one thing about an evening with you, Shayne—a girl gets plenty of action."

V

BUT THERE WAS NO further action—not then. Mike Shayne drove Diana Lee to her hotel, the twelve-story new Hermitage House, grey in the moonlight overlooking South Bayshore Drive. Their tail kept its distance, slowing when the redhead slowed, picking up the pace when he did, offering no chance for either cut-off or confrontation.

He left the Buick in the entry outside the big glass front doors, noting that the following car parked discreetly a short block behind them, told the uniformed night doorman to leave the Buick where it was as he would be right back.

In the lobby, he said, "I hope

your rooms aren't on one of the lower floors, Miss Lee."

"For Pete's sake, Diana," she told him. "After all we've been through together . . ."

Shayne had to smile. He said, "Just being careful. Don't forget to clean and reload."

"I used to be in Naval Intelligence," she replied. "Talk about teaching your grandmother to suck eggs!"

"Okay, as long as you lay off the 'Don't make WAVES bit."

She laughed suddenly, refreshingly, said, "I guess we're both pretty corny."

"Me corny—you pretty."

She went serious, said, "Mike, what about that car outside. You'll be okay? They may be laying back until they get a crack at you alone."

His face went granite hard. "That," he said, "is what I'm devoutly hoping for."

"Be careful. I'm going to be at the office tomorrow."

Shayne's left eyebrow rose. "Running down the girl who gave you the tip on the Mirabeau?" He tugged at his left ear-lobe. "Maybe she was trying to do you a favor."

"Maybe . . ." Diana ran a coral pink tongue-tip across her upper lip. "But that still leaves the little matter of where, when, how and from whom she got the tip."

Shayne nodded, said, "Okay,

you hit the Triple-A end, I'll work the other angle."

"Lots of luck. You know where to reach me."

"You, too, Diana. I have a hunch we're both going to need all the luck we can get."

Outside, Shayne took the turnaround and headed back north toward his Second Street apartment hotel. He passed three cars a block from the Hermitage Inn, none of them distinctive. Nor did his headlights pick out any recognizable features of anyone sitting inside them.

He was not even sure the car that had tailed him from the Mirabeau was there until, when he was a block beyond them, the front car peeled off and made a U-turn to pick up the tail once more. Again it sedately held its distance to his rear.

The detective might have been content to leave things at that had not his rearview-mirror vigil caused him to avoid by a hair's breadth being sideswiped by a drunk in a Stingray who came careening through a red light. This made him angry although he continued his northward drive at a leisurely pace.

Then, just three blocks from his own basement parking-garage, the detective pushed his foot down hard on the gas,

spurted to the mouth of an alley, made the left turn on two skidding wheels, ran into the alley for forty yards and braked to a silent stop. Gun in hand, he leapt from the Buick, sprinted to a recessed side door of an aging apartment house now dark and condemned, melted into the shadow and waited.

Less than ten seconds later, a car drew across the alley mouth and halted. Over the low hum of the softly running motor, the redhead heard a low-pitched male voice say, "There's his wheels. Where in hell to you suppose he's gone?"

"Be careful, Jake." Another male voice. "You know he's a cutie-pie."

"Keep me covered, Harry."

The car door opened and a man got out, pulling a revolver from a belt holster. He stood studying the alley blocked by the redhead's car, then advanced cautiously into it.

When he came abreast of the doorway, Shayne said, "You get the hell back to Petey Painter, Jake, and tell him I can keep my own nose wiped. And take Harry Johnson with you when you go."

"Aw Jesus, Shayne, don't pop your skull. We got our orders."

"So, believe it or not, has your chief. Holster your piece and tell him you put Mike

Shayne to bed and tucked him in."

Reluctantly, Jake stuffed his revolver back into its waistband rig and returned to the driver's seat of the car. Moments later, they pulled away and the redhead emerged from his doorway cover and watched them drive off.

He was sore as a boil. He had forgiven the first intrusion of Painter's men that evening because the chief had obviously been unable to prevent it. But this was a direct violation of their verbal agreement. He needed a couple of Miami Beach detectiyes wetnursing him about as much as he needed twenty-pound weights on his ankles.

He stuffed his .45 away, got back into the Buick and unhooked the special radio telephone with which it was equipped. Painter, as Shayne expected, was still in his office, presumably supervising the search for Herky Byles' killer or killers.

When the chief across the bay came on, the redhead said, "Petey, what in hell are you trying to pull?"

"What do you mean, Shayne? I'm not trying to pull any—"

"Come off it, Petey," the redhead snapped. "I just chased Jake Cameron and Harry Johnson off my tail. You prom-

ised me you'd leave me alone."

"Shayne, I've got troubles—real troubles—and I need your needling me now like another hole in the head."

"I'm not needling you, Petey. Jake and Harry have been riding my tail ever since I left the hotel."

"They've been . . ." Painter tailed off. There was silence, then, "I'm sorry, Mike, but there's been an awful lot of confusion around here since Herky caught it. It won't happen again."

"It had better not," Shayne growled.

He fired up a cigaret and sat wreathed in smoke and thought. He could usually read Peter Painter like a book, could tell when his bluster was strictly wind and when it was for real. But this time there had been no bluster at all . . .

With narrowed eyes, the detective considered this odd variation in his old foe's behavior. He wondered what it could mean. One thing was certain—if Painter had not put the two bulldogs on his tail, the Miami Beach chief was in real trouble. It meant he no longer controlled his own operation.

Deciding to let it ride, his anger evaporating into something very like sympathy, Shayne got his motor going and backed out of the alley, which

dead-ended ahead of him. A car coming down Second Street caused him to brake hurriedly just as he got the Buick half-way out of the narrow way to avoid being T-boned.

When he began to back again, his foot came down on the gas pedal too heavily, causing it to buck, then stall. At that instant a small caliber handgun popped twice and a pair of small-bore mercury bullets exploded in the Buick's rear part, exactly where his head would have been had the car not stalled . . .

Mike Shayne pulled his automatic clear of its spring shoulder holster even as he flung himself along the front seat to take a quick covert look for the origin of the unexpected ambush. Some sixty feet away, a low black car was parked double, its headlights out.

He made no attempt to move the Buick, since he had literally nowhere to go. If he ran it forward into the alley again, he'd be a rat in a trap. If he backed out further, he'd be a sitting duck. So he determined to shoot it out where he was, at least covered by the heavy steel of his car.

The whole thing spelled mob operation—the cleverness of the setup, the use of small caliber, probably .22, explosive bullets.

Lifting his own weapon

cautiously, the redhead got a good line on the would-be assassin's vehicle—just as its headlights were turned on, flooding the Buick with light.

The lights had been turned on, Shayne knew, both to illuminate the Buick and to blind him against accurate counterfire. The redhead closed his eyes, relying on the mental image he already had, and blasted five shots in return—half a clip.

He heard a crunch of metal followed by the tinkling crash of glass, risked another quick look to see that one headlight had been shattered, fired two shots through the windshield, spacing them carefully to hit driver and passenger in case there were two of them, heard a yelp of anguish and sent his last three slugs crashing into the car's radiator before he flattened out and reached for a refill clip.

Shayne heard the car's motor start before he could take another look. By the time he was up again, it was moving toward him, crazily, its motor making sounds like a lot of loose tin cans, its left front tire flat, causing it to waddle like a drunken duck.

For a moment, Shayne thought it was going to crash the rear of his Buick, but it veered crazily left to stagger

across the street and into a fire hydrant. Running footsteps diverted his attention and he glanced left just before the fuel tank of the wounded hit-car exploded—in time to catch a glimpse of a burly man with a hooked nose as he disappeared around the next corner.

The redhead raced to the flaming car, a once-handsome Jaguar XJ-10, managed to pull a man out of it and drag him clear of the wreck before the flames reached him. From his position, he had been the driver of the hit-car and from his condition it seemed unlikely that he would live to talk.

One of Shayne's heavy slugs had torn away half his lower jaw and the entire left side of his neck and the severed carotid artery was pumping out blood in a torrent.

Moving well clear of the blazing wreckage, the redhead reholstered his .45 and lit a cigaret while he awaited the arrival of the authorites. It had, he thought, been a long night already—with long wakeful hours still ahead . . .

VI

MIKE SHAYNE DID NOT hit his Flagler Street office until close to noon the following morning, still feeling grumpy and short of sleep. There had been the

police, of course, and the reporters to deal with.

Lucy Hamilton, ballpoint tip in mouth, regarded him with the familiar look of speculation he had learned to expect from his pert secretary when he came in after a violent night.

He said, "It's all right, Angel, I'm all here."

"Michael!" she said, shaking her head. "The chances you take! I only heard about it on the A.M. news over TV, and I'm a worse wreck than you are."

"With one big difference," he replied. "You don't look it."

She shook her lovely head, then sighed, then dimpled, then said, "Who's Diana Lee?"

"A Triple-A operative."

"She sounds attractive."

"She's knock-kneed, bow-legged and pigeon-toed," he replied. "And, oh yes, buck-toothed. What does she want?"

"She wants you to call her. It seems she saw the news, too. Michael, she sounded concerned."

"You think you're the only one who cares?" The redhead bent to plant a kiss on Lucy's lips. Call her—no, wait. Call Tim first."

Seated across from the dour, lanky *Daily News* reporter in their regular rear booth in The Beef House, Shayne gave his old friend a running account of the past night's events. Tim lis-

tened, shook his hound-dog head, said, "Little man, you *have* had a busy night. And, to the pretty Irish waitress, "Patti, bring me another of the same."

"For me, too," said the redhead.

While they awaited their respective boilermaker and double Martell on the rocks, Rourke and Shayne started into the steaming platters the girl had laid before them. The reporter, who could stow food away in his lank stringbean body like a man with a tapeworm, dug into a quartet of eggs, sunnyside, resting on a huge mound of roast beef hash flanked on one side by a half dozen pork sausages, on the other by a small lumber yard of German fried potatoes.

The redhead, who had not eaten since his dinner with Diana the night before on relatively flimsy French food, now occupied himself with an outside double-rib slab of roast beef, near-charcoal on the outside end, blood rare on the inside, accompanied by a lavish panache of fresh green vegetables and a mesa of O'Brien potatoes, cubed and browned with peppers and onions.

For a time there was silence, then the detective said without looking up, "Did you get anything on those people the Levi-



sons had dinner with—the Jeremy Falters?"

Rourke grunted an, "Uh-huh," cleared mouth and throat with a half a boilermaker, said, "They live in Bal Harbour—big place overlooking a small private marina. They're rich but not social if you know what I mean. That is, not Society, capital S."

Mike Shayne nodded, getting his friend's point. "New money?" he asked.

The reporter shrugged. "Been here five, maybe six years. Jeremy Falter is a C.P.A., retired before forty. Comes from Philadelphia. She's a dozen years younger, from Ohio—Cleveland, I guess."

"That's all?"

"Like I said, they're not Society. They live quietly. So they don't make the papers. Not much, anyway. She did some charity work three-four years ago, but that petered out—or she petered out. He goes deep-sea fishing, Word is, he's lousy at it."

"You need a new morgue. So

why would they be entertaining the Howard Leviton couple so conveniently last night when the jewel heist was on?"

"Could be a thousand reasons, Mike, for Christ sake."

"Sure," said Shayne, "but I want to know the exact one."

"You expect me to find that out?" Rourke looked mortally injured.

"I thought you were supposed to be a great reporter."

"I thought you were supposed to be a great detective."

Shayne smiled crookedly, said, "Unlike you, I intend to put it to the test."

"You're going out there?" Tim Rourke asked.

"Why not? Something wrong with it? I'm not going to accuse them of anything. How can I? And even if I was . . ." He let it hang.

Feeling more or less reborn with a few hours sleep, a good meal and a quartet of drinks under his belt, Shayne toolled his Buick, bullet-holed tonneau and all, to the low artificial hill, girt with a cypress palisade, behind which the Jeremy Falters lived.

As he turned in at a driveway protected with a red-brick gateway, the redhead received an impression of opulence well protected. The wrought-iron gate itself looked stout enough to withstand anything short of

a bazooka blast while, behind the cypresses, the detective caught glints of a link-chain fence. He explained, via a conveniently located voice-box, that he was calling on behalf of Triple-A insurance in regard to the attempted robbery of the Falters' guests, the Leviton's, last night.

A male voice squawked, "Oh, Jesus—not again!" and was followed by a reluctant, "Okay, come on in."

Slowly, the gates parted electronically and Shayne drove through. A straight crushed rock driveway, flanked by meticulously groomed lawn and flowerbeds, led the way to a grey-and-white Palladian villa with attractive bright red doors and shutters that seemed to smile a welcome beneath a steeply pitched blue slate roof flanked by tall brick chimneys.

The driveway circled a small rock garden with fountain directly before the house, with parking room on one side and a lateral continuation toward what the detective judged to be the kitchen area on the other. Some people, he thought, not only had the desire to live well but the means.

Beyond the kitchen, Shayne noted a matching garage whose doors were open, revealing space for three cars, two of them filled by an elegant

grey-and-black Rolls and a plum colored Jensen in matching colors. The third space was empty.

As he climbed out of the Buick, the red front door with its brightly polished brass knocker and handle was opened by a short, stocky, tightly handsome man whose face looked young for what Shayne took to be his forty-odd years, just as his sleekly styled silver hair looked old. He wore espadrilles, knee-length blue Bermuda shorts and a black-and-white striped sports shirt open to his breastbone.

"You the man from Triple-A?" he asked in a flat, big-city voice.

"I'm working for them," Shayne replied.

"Interesting," the man replied. "I'm Jerry Falter."

"I'm Shayne—Mike Shayne."

The man nodded, stepped aside for the detective to enter, said, "I wish to hell Marci had never asked those people to dinner last night. We've been bugged all day over it. And it didn't even happen here."

He sounded peevish as he led Mike Shayne into a comfortably opulent living room in which a near-naked young woman lay stretched out on a striped sofa, sipping some sort of fruit drink as she watched an afternoon movie on a huge TV screen set

above a Florentine marble fireplace.

VII

MARCI FALTER NODDED slightly, flipped a languid hand in salute, continued to watch the TV movie, a black-and-white Alan Ladd crime drama of the early 1950's. Mike Shayne studied her face, managing to keep his eyes from the shapely legs displayed by the shortest of emerald shorts, the provocatively molded torso all but fully revealed by a green and yellow silk kerchief tied around her chest.

She was small, no more than a size three, Shayne judged, but every visible square millimeter was prime grade flesh. Her hair was dark and cut close around a heart-shaped little face dominated by a tiny madder-red mouth and the great dark-lashed eyes that were its only full sized features.

It was not her beauty that drew the redhead's attention—although she was beautiful—it was the fact that he well knew he had seen that face before, and in very different circumstances.

He racked his memory bank, seeking the source of his *déjà vu* feeling but could not run it down.

"You have some questions?"

Jeremy Falter's voice snipped off the detective's brown study.

"Only one, really," Shayne replied. "Since you just suggested that your wife invited the Levitons to dinner last night, perhaps I'd better ask her."

"In that case," Falter replied, "you'd better wait till the next commercial. When Marci watches television, she really watches television."

"That doesn't mean I'm deaf—or dumb," the young woman suddenly remarked without taking her eyes from the huge wall screen. "Uncle Jim called Tuesday afternoon and said these dear old friends of his were coming to Miami and had last night free—so would we fill it for them. That's it—period, unquote."

"Who is Uncle Jim?" Shayne inquired. Marci Falter's low-pitched, slightly husky contralto had given his memory bank another nudge without unlocking it.

"He's in Cleveland," the girl replied. "What's the point in dragging *him* into this?"

The redhead frowned at Marci, tugged at his left ear-lobe, then said, "Okay, let it ride. Sorry to bug you nice people, but we're grabbing at straws."

"It's okay." She still didn't favor him with a look. He rose,

as did her husband, who ushered him to the door.

Falter said, "Marci can be pretty abrupt some times. But *nobody* can get her to talk when she doesn't want to." He sighed and shook his prematurely white head.

Shayne said, "You wouldn't care to volunteer Uncle Jim's last name, would you?"

"Afraid not." Beneath the deepwater tan that covered his face, Falter reddened with embarrassment.

Shayne nodded, said, "It's okay. And—thanks."

"For nothing, I'm afraid."

As the redhead walked to his Buick, he had a definite feeling that he was being watched. He made no move to run down the source of this uncomfortable sensation until, just before he stepped into the car, he flashed a quick comprehensive panoramic look around.

Something flickered in the window over the two cars in the three-car garage. It could have been a random reflection—or it could have been someone dropping a curtain not quite quickly enough.

After driving clear of the area of the Jeremy Falter estate, Shayne pulled to the side of a well manicured road and halted. He telephoned Lucy, learned that Diana had called twice more in his absence and

was anxious to have him get in touch with her. Shayne wanted to talk with Len Sturgis, Miami Chief of Detectives, as to the identity of the man he had shot the night before. He also wanted to have a chat with Peter Painter.

But Triple-A was paying him three bills a day, plus a hefty advance and expense money, so he decided to see his employers first. He puzzled as to the nature of his fugitive half-memory of Marci Falter en route.

They met in Angus MacLynne's big comfortable office as before, save that this time MacLynne left them to their own devices. Diana's cool blonde elegance, encased in a scarlet pants suit with crisp white shirtwaist and collar, offered sharp contrast to Marci Falter's casual near-nudity.

They sat across MacLynne's big desk, Diana in her chief's big Windsor chair. Shayne fired up for both of them and told her what he had done since taking her home the night before.

"Jesus, Mike, you *have* been busy," she said. "Any line on the hood you wiped out?"

"Let me call Len Sturgis and see if he's picked up anything," Mike Shayne said.

"Be my guest." Diana pushed one of the three desk telephones toward him.

He dialled Headquarters. Captain Sturgis was out, but his assistant, Lieutenant Barney McWatters, came on the line to say, "All we got to date, Shayne, is that he's a pro, an import brought in for the job."

"No name?"

"Not yet. But he's not a local. We've got a sheet out with the F.B.I. It should bring in something."

"Okay—thanks." Mike Shayne ran a thumbnail along the line of his jaw as he pushed the phone back toward Diana. He said, "What have you come up with?"

"Not a hell of a lot—yet. I talked to the Levitons this morning. They still can't believe it. They're from Cleveland, middle aged, rich."

"How'd he make his money?"

"Warehousing, in Cleveland. He represented a Canadian Cola import business, too. Coca-cola." She checked the open folder in front of her. Nothing special about either of them. Just your ordinary, garden variety of Midwestern millionaire."

"Anything else?"

"Just one item. You remember Alison Deane of San Francisco?"

Shayne's eyes narrowed. "She's the Bengal elephants broad."

"Right. Well, the office has been checking all the losers

out, and it seems Miss Deane was attending a water festival at the marina the night she was robbed—with guess who?"

"The Falters?"

"Jeremy Falter. The good wife didn't show for that one."

"I'll be God damned. What about the others?"

"No visible connection." She shook her head. "Don't think Triple-A isn't digging in. If there are any other links, we'll find them."

"There must be." Shayne squinted through a small cloud of his own cigarette smoke. "What about the girl here who tipped you off to the Mirabeau last night?"

"She called in sick." Diana frowned. "Anyway, her roommate did."

"You got her address?"

"I can get it." She reached for a phone.

"Let's go then," said Shayne, rising. Again, he had a gut feeling something was very wrong.

The young woman's name was Eve Coulter. She worked in the auditing department of Triple-A and lived in a modest apartment building on the edge of the original part of Miami well south of the business district. It was an area composed largely of private homes, more or less gone to seed, of overgrown vacant lots, a few of which were occupied by new

developments like that in which Eve Coulter lived.

Ms. Coulter was not visibly ill—in fact, she was not visible at all. According to the matronly manager, whose perplexity was evident behind her gold-rimmed pinse nez, Ms. Coulter had departed the premises some time during the night. Also, she had no roommate. Ms. Coulter lived alone.

"Could we look at her apartment?" Shayne inquired.

"Miss Lee may." the manager radiated propriety. "Gentlemen are not permitted above the first floor."

"I'm no gentleman, I'm a detective—and Miss Lee and I are working on a case for her company, Coulter's employer." Shayne pulled out his waller and flashed his card.

"I'll vouch for him," said Diana, producing her own identification.

"Oh, dear, I hope Eve isn't in any trouble." The matronly woman seemed actually to flutter.

"So do we," said Mike Shayne, his grey eyes ice cold.

"I suppose, under the circumstances, it would be all right." The matron sounded dubious . . .

VIII

EVE COULTER'S BACHELOR PAD

was spotlessly neat. There was no sign of violence. The bed was made, the cosmetics jars in the bathroom were lined up like toy soldiers on parade, the towels were neatly folded in the wall rack, the ashtrays spotless. Only the thinnest layer of dust on the tabletops suggested it had not been cleaned that morning.

"What do you think, Mike?" Diana asked.

Shayne frowned, rubbed his chin, looked around again, then turned to the matron, said, "Is there anything missing apart from Ms. Coulter?"

Again the pince nez fluttered. "Not that I can tell," she replied. Then, "But how would I know?"

The redhead pointed toward the top of the single night table flanking the narrow bed, indicated a slot in the dust backed by a shorter slot, said, "Looks as though something was taken from here—maybe a picture in a stand-up frame . . ."

The matron's troubled brow cleared. She said, "There was a photograph—of a fine looking grey-haired gentleman, Eve's uncle, I believe."

"She told you?" Shayne's question was rapier sharp.

"Not exactly." Fluttery again.

"Then why her uncle?"

"It was signed *Uncle Jim*. It was always right there on the



table." Defensively, then, "To Evie, from her ever devoted Uncle Jim"—that's what it said."

"Did she ever mention him to you?" It was Diana's turn.

"Never—as far as I can remember. What should I do? Call the police?"

Shayne tugged at his earlobe, said, "If Ms. Coulter is voluntarily absent, she might not like it. If she's being detained against her will, it might be wiser to let whoever is holding her get in touch with Miss Lee or myself."

"I don't like the look of it, but it's still too early to tell. We're going to look for her. I'd say, give her a few hours—till six o'clock. If you haven't heard from us by then, or if she hasn't returned, then go ahead."

"Oh, dear! I do hope nothing bad has . . ."

She was still fluttering when Shayne and Diana left her to go to his car. As they settled into it, she said, "You pulled out of there awfully quick, didn't you, Mike?"

"I want to find Uncle Jim," he replied, putting the Buick in gear.

"White haired—you think it could be Jeremy Falter?"

"I doubt it. It was he who believed about his wife's Uncle Jim getting them involved with the Levitons and the attempted robbery last night."

"How do you figure it, Mike?"

"I don't—yet. Come on. Let's pay a visit to the *Miami News*."

"What for?"

"I have a friend there who may be of help."

He checked the office via the Buick radio phone, since it was close to shut-down time, asked Lucy if anything had come up.

"Chief Painter's been calling in every few minutes. He says it's vital that he see you."

"Where—and when?"

"He's in his office right now."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Angel. Tell Petey we'll be in the Regis room of the Pompadour in—exactly one hour." Then, to Diana after hanging up, "Are you ready for Peter Painter?"

"Should I be?"

"One never knows." He shook his red head.

The detective had arranged the meeting away from the Miami Beach Police Headquarters for the very good reason that apparently the very walls of that institution had developed ears. His near-fatal encounter with Detectives Cameron and Johnson the night before had not been reassuring, nor was Painter's distrust of his own operation.

Beside him, Diana murmured, "'Angel'?"

Shayne felt his face redden beneath its year-round tan. *Damn all women—bless them!* he thought.

Accustomed over the years to Peter Painter's savage raillery and bluster, not even his recent experience of a humbled and frightened Miami Beach Police Chief had prepared the redhead for the reception the dapper little man gave them when they entered the Regis Room.

He received Diana pleasantly but at Shayne he positively beamed, almost pulling him into the banquette in which he was seated, gripping his hand fervently, beckoning a hovering waiter and telling him to give his guests their pleasure.

"Mike," he effused, "how can I ever thank you?" It was the only time in Shayne's memory that Painter had used his first

name save as an instrument of insult.

The redhead was about to utter a startled, "Wha' I do?" when Diana forestalled him with a few phrases of being charmed to meet such an important person, words which restored Painter to something like his usual self-esteem.

But the gratefulness returned with the drinks the waiter swiftly brought them, "Mike," the police chief said, "if you hadn't handled Cameron and Johnson as you did last night, I'd still be under water, not knowing who was pulling me down."

"Those two crumbs set me up for a mob wipeout," the redhead muttered, still unsure of the cause of his old enemy's gratitude.

"They didn't know they were setting you up—and you got through it okay, thank God! When word came in of the attempt to wipe you out, they came in and confessed. It was Linkletter, my chief of operations, who has responsible. *Linkletter*, with his finger on every assignment. The bastard sold out. It was he who set up poor Herky Byles at the Mirabeau last night, it was he who was moving the boys around so no one would be on the scene of any of those damned robberies . . ."

"Linkletter . . ." Shayne mused. "How long has he been with you?"

"Fifteen years! I raised him from a harness-bull pup, the ungrateful . . ."

"He confessed?" Shayne asked.

"Not exactly." Faint indications of perturbation leaked through Painter's euphoria. "He must have got word. Anyway, when we went to get him, he was gone." A pause, a growl, then, "The so-and-so took the men's room key with him."

When at length Painter concluded his diatribe against the missing Linkletter, he again voiced his gratefulness to the detective and said, "If there's ever anything I can do for you, Mike—anything at all that's within my power—just say the word."

"Okay." Shayne toyed with his nearly empty double Martell on the rocks. "There is one thing."

"Name it," said Painter.

"Who is Uncle Jim?"

"Who is *who*?" The Painter mustache tips turned into question marks.

"Uncle Jim. A fine looking white-haired old gentleman who seems to be somewhere in the background of these hotel jewel rip-offs that have been driving you up the wall."

"Oh—*them!*" Painter dismissed

sed the cause of his last night's panic with a cavalier gesture. "Don't worry about them, either of you. With Linkletter out of action, we'll put a stop to them, never fear. You may tell your Mr. MacLynne that for me, Miss Lee."

This, the redhead thought, sounded more like the Peter Painter he had known so long and learned to hate so well. He hoisted Diana to her feet, bade the Beach police chief farewell and got them out of there.

"Do you really think he'll stop the ripoffs?" Diana asked him as they edged onto the MacArthur Causeway.

"Probably. At least he'll put a major crimp in the operation. These thefts have been successful because of a beautifully intricate criminal organization. A, the jewels and their owners and their coverage, plus the plans of their owners to visit Miami Beach had to be pinpointed exactly.

"B, once the owners arrived at the Beach with their jewels, the organization had to know when they'd be out of their rooms, in some instances, apparently like the Levitons, decoy them.

"C, with that arranged, the robbers could pull the ripoff—but only if they were certain there would be no police interference. That was Lieutenant

Linkletter's job, and that's a vital element of their operation that has been checked, thanks more to bull luck on my part than to any great detective work."

"I wouldn't say that," Diana told him. "If you hadn't duped them into exposing themselves and called Chief Painter, it wouldn't have worked. And, if you hadn't survived the hit that followed . . ." She let it hang right there.

For a sweet moment, wrapped in the perfume of the golden creature at his side, Mike Shayne was tempted. He said, Diana, darling, I did survive. What do you say we celebrate it?"

"At the *Miami News* morgue?" she countered, effectively stopping him in his tracks . . .

IX

THE FLUORESCENT TUBE lighting of the newspaper reference room cast an unearthly pallor over those within its range, making Rourke look even more cadaverous than usual and giving even Diana Lee the appearance of a zombi. Shayne was glad there was no mirror in which he could see his own reflection.

The reporter had the folder of clips they wanted waiting on a central table and they sat down

to go through the clippings it contained. The job did not take long.

On Mrs. Jeremy Marcia Falter, there were seven brief items. All were at least two years out of date, all but one dealt with her as a member of various charity drive boards, none of them suggesting any position of leadership.

On Jeremy Falter, there were none. He was referred to as Marci's husband in the remaining clip, the oldest of the small bunch. The story, little more than a half column of newsprint, dealt mostly with a Mrs. Ellen Fabian of Coral Gables, who had sponsored a small luncheon in honor of Marci Falter at a posh woman's club shortly after the Falters' arrival on the local scene.

It stated that Mmes. Fabian and Falter had attended school together in Switzerland, mentioned the fact that the Falters had moved permanently to the Miami area from Philadelphia, where her husband had been employed as an accountant.

"That's all?" the redhead asked.

"That's all the print they've seen in this city," Rourke replied.

Diana exhaled loudly, said, "I'll check out this Mrs. Fabian in the morning. Okay?"

"You've got it," said Shayne.

"School in Switzerland sounds like money."

"Like somebody's money," Diana frowned. "Sometimes a poor relation gets staked by a rich uncle or aunt. But it doesn't get us any closer to Eve Coulter."

"You found nothing on her, I suppose." The redhead raised an eyebrow at Rourke.

"Ceiling zilch," Tim replied. "Sorry, kids, that's all there is."

Shayne rubbed powerful chin between thumb and forefinger. "Maybe Eve went to school in Switzerland," he offered.

"If she did, I'll find out. Besides, the firm will have her dossier."

"Get it," said Shayne. "I'll see what I can get on Jeremy, the husband. Okay, let's get something to eat."

Diana begged off, saying she was going back to Triple-A and look into the missing girl's background. Tim Rourke returned the skimpy file to the librarian and adjourned with Shayne to The Beef House.

There, over a fresh double Martell on the rocks, the detective asked for a telephone, which the night waitress brought and jacked in promptly. Tim looked on over the rim of his boilermaker, said, "Working at meal time is bad for the digestion."

"A problem you'll never have

to face, Tim. Besides, it's not mealtime yet." He dialed Police Headquarters, got Barney McWatters, said, "Shayne here again, Barney. You got any report on a young woman named Eve Coulter?"

"Should we have? What kind?"

"Anything from D.O.A. to Reported Missing. No sweat—just wanted to know."

"I'll check it out."

Moments later, McWatters was back with, "Nothing yet. Want us to keep an eye out?"

"It wouldn't hurt. Thanks."

Shayne reached for his brandy, downed three ounces, then put in a person-to-person call to Arlie Williams of Philadelphia. Rourke said, "What in hell is Arlie Williams?"

"Private eye—a good one. He owes me a couple of favors."

It took some little while to locate Arlie Williams. During the wait, their food arrived. Shayne had opted for braised short ribs, the evening special, which came in a small pond of thick brown onion, mushroom and sherry gravy buttressed by crisply browned whole potatoes... also steaming French bread to sop up any remaining sauce.

Rourke, taking a different route as usual, ordered a creamy chicken hash topped

with browned grated cheese and served in a large oval bowl, accompanied by puréed artichoke hearts and steaming whipped potatoes. For a while, there was no noise from the booth save for the noises of gustatory enjoyment.

When the phone rang, the sound was so abrupt and unexpected that it made the reporter jump and spill half a forkful onto his place mat. The redhead picked up the instrument, half-smiling at the reporter's reaction, said, "Shayne here."

It was Arlie Williams from Philadelphia. After the usual exchange of pleasantries, he asked the redhead what he wanted. Shayne told him. For a long moment there was silence.

Then, "Jesus, Mike, it's been years—at least six. There was something—a scandal, I think. You say Jeremy Falter, a C.P.A.?"

"That's right."

"I can check it out, but off the top, I seem to recall a stink around that name. He was an accountant, a redhot mathematical quiz-kid, something like that. Seems he was caught by the I.R.S. falsifying the returns of some of our fair city's most important citizens. It was pretty well hushed up, natch, but it was hot while it lasted. Don't ask me what became of him, but I'd be willing to lay long

odds he never served a day in the slammer."

"What kind of citizens?" the redhead asked.

"What kind do you expect? Borderline businessmen, even a few mobsters—all top drawer, natch. And he was God-damned good, Mike. If somebody hadn't finked, they'd never have got him. As I remember, he could make computers sit up and beg."

There was more in the same vein. Falter had put himself through the University of Pennsylvania, specializing in electrical engineering, then had taken a course at the Wharton School of Business and Finance, had ridden high for some years, then blown it all.

"I'll check it out for you tomorrow, Mike," Arlie Williams concluded.

"No need," said the redhead. "Unless you come up with a specific mob tie-in that might lead here. You've got quite a memory."

"Except I can't even remember my Social Security number," Williams replied. "Okay, Mike. Glad to be of service. Hope it helps."

"It could. Oh, one more thing—does the name Uncle Jim mean anything to you?"

Another silence, then a negative. Shayne hung up, said to Rourke, "It seems we've got us



some kind of a crooked genius in Falter. I wonder . . ."

"You wonder what, Mike?"

"I wonder if he's the link to the how the ripoffs were tipped. A man who really knows computers can tap in on a lot of supposedly secret information. Especially if he's got an inside source."

"Like this Eve Coulter?"

The detective nodded, then shook his head, added, "But somehow, I can't picture Jeremy Falter as a master mind in this sort of a deal."

"Sounds like you're still fishing for the mysterious Uncle Jim." Rourke who had mopped up his chicken hash while the redhead was on the phone, looked on biliously as his companion completed the demolition of his now well-cooled short ribs.

X

BY MIKE SHAYNE'S WRISTWATCH, it was close to midnight when he and Rourke vacated The Beef House. The detective drove his friend through the near-empty streets to the parking area outside the *Daily News* building to pick up his increasingly venerable Ford.

Approaching his own apartment house, the redhead reviewed such progress as he and Diana Lee had thus far made in the investigation.

Shayne felt gnawing dissatisfaction. It was as if they were engulfed in a maze. New passages kept opening up only to turn into dead ends. Promising leads to the core of the enigma, when they didn't dead-end, led them back to the periphery.

Linkletter was the key to the rottenness in Peter Painter's operation across the bay, but Linkletter had vanished. Eve Coulter was the key to the leak in Triple-A, and she, too, had come up missing. Although Shayne had secured interesting background information on Jeremy Falter, the accountant's debt to society had apparently been paid, however unsatisfactorily, in Philadelphia before his arrival on the Miami scene.

Evidently, the efforts of Will Gentry's Homicide Division

here in Miami had failed to identify a make on the hit man who had so nearly nailed Shayne the night before. If they had discovered his identity and source, Barney McWatters would have let him know over the phone at The Beef House just now.

And who was the man with the hooked beak Diana had spotted fleeing the scene after Herky Byles' murder at the Mirabeau, probably the same man the redhead had seen fleeing the scene of his own attempted assassination?

Why had Marci Falter looked familiar—and who and what was the grey-haired Uncle Jim lurking in the background?

Mike Shayne felt like a man on a treadmill with his feet sinking in soft sand. There was nothing solid, to date, that he could sink his teeth into.

Uncle Jim . . .

The short ride home was uneventful, the streets close to empty of traffic in cars or afoot. Quiet night, peaceful night. Shayne's hackles did not rise until he saw the plum colored Jensen parked across the street from the ramp entrance to his underground garage. Its opulent streamlining gleamed softly in the dimness of the street lighting.

Shayne pulled to the curb, loosened the Colt .45 in its

shoulder holster, got out and parked on the street. The powerful British luxury sports car's roof barely reached his breastbone. Whether it was the same vehicle he had noted in the Falters' garage that afternoon, the detective had no way of knowing—but he would have been quite willing to give odds that it was.

The line had been discontinued some years ago and only a few Jensens had been sold in America . . .

He circled it, testing the two doors. They were locked. He had a sudden memory vision of the Falters' garage, its doors slid back, two of its spaces filled with a similar (or the same) Jensen and a grey-and-black Rolls Royce. It occurred to him that the third, the empty space, might have been waiting in vain for the return of another British luxury car—the Jaguar reduced to flaming ruin by Shayne's pistol fire the night before, only a few blocks away.

Sufficient evidence to go with to the police and get a warrant to search the Falter estate? Hardly . . .

Annoyed, the detective stepped back into the shade of some moderately manicured shrubbery and scanned the vicinity. His hackles were still up, the sense of impending danger ominous. Across the street, the

dimly lit entry of his home building looked serene. The even more dimly lit entrance to the basement parking garage revealed no overt threat.

But the presence of the Jensen spelled danger.

His every sense alerted, Shayne crossed the street and entered the apartment hotel, using his key to unlock the night-security door. The small lobby was unoccupied, the desk clerk dozed behind the modest counter and switchboard.

It seemed a shame to wake him up . . .

A call buzzed on the board and the redhead was grateful to the caller for saving him the trouble of rousing the grey-haired clerk. But the clerk made no move to answer it.

The detective's grey eyes narrowed. The buzzing was repeated, and still the sleeper did not wake.

Three quick strides took Mike Shayne across the lobby. He peered over the counter at the sleeping night deskman, saw the purple bruise that covered his right temple. It looked fresh, raw, with a tiny trickle of blood beginning to harden, running the length of his cheek.

The redhead vaulted the counter for a closer look. The poor man—Willets—was unconscious. The size and shape of

the bruise suggested that he had been laid out with the butt of a heavy pistol.

Ignoring the repeated buzzes, Shayne plucked up the desk telephone, dialled Police Headquarters, said, "This is Mike Shayne reporting a felonious assault." He gave his address and a brief resumé of the situation, was assured of prompt response and hung up.

His obvious move was to go back outside and wait for the law's arrival. Willets was beginning to snore, suggesting that he was suffering from concussion. But at least he was alive. And the detective was consumed with curiosity as to what had prompted the assault.

Shayne had a powerful hunch that it was a preliminary to some sort of attack on himself. He longed to take the elevator to his apartment above, to discover the nature of the attack, to flush out the attacker or attackers.

In one sense, he felt reassured. His progress might seem to him frustrated at every turn—but evidently someone on the other side took a different view. It was unlikely anyone would risk such a move on the hotel unless he or she felt the situation desperate enough to prompt it.

Go on up or wait it out—which?

Shayne was still pondering the alternatives when the initiative was removed by the rumble of the elevator coming down. At his elbow, the switchboard's single buzzing had been joined by another, making a sound like cicadas in hot weather.

Using the board as a cover, the redhead laid the unconscious clerk on the carpet behind the desk, drew his heavy handgun and waited for the doors to slide open and reveal the lift's passenger.

But the elevator, grumbling in its progress, did not halt at the main floor. Instead, it continued on downward, toward the garage. Mike Shayne slammed out from behind the desk, flipping off the lobby lights as he passed, headed for the front door. Just as he reached it, he heard the soft clank of the elevator door opening on the floor beneath.

Determined to intercept the passenger, he got the heavy door open and leapt through it and down the three-stair flight of concrete steps that led to the sidewalk. It was the speed of his exit that saved his life.

Even as he hit the sidewalk, a gun flashed from across the street and a bullet whined just over his head, ricocheted off the brass door jamb and whined away in the night. Another

shot followed, this one plucking at the sleeve of his jacket just below the shoulder. The fire seemed to be coming from behind the Jensen.

Mike Shayne winged two bullets in return as he flung himself prone on the concrete. He lay behind a parked Continental, which gave him fair coverage but but his field of vision severely.

He heard footsteps pattering up the garage ramp, and shifted position to get a view of whoever emerged. As he did so, his head evidently became visible from across the street, for another bullet came his way, whanging into the radiator of the big sedan.

The detective pulled in a trifle, but no more bullets came from across the street. The patter of the man running up the garage ramp grew rapidly louder. A hoarse voice called, *"Watch it, man! Shayne is waiting for you!"*

The redhead got up on one knee and took aim at the entrance. He did not want to kill this person. He wanted him turned over to the police for investigation. He rose still further just as the man emerged.

"Hold it right where you are!" he shouted.

His reluctance to open fire again all but cost him his life.

The gun across the street

flashed once more and this bullet neatly removed the snap-brim fedora from his head. Shayne could feel the brief hot wind of it as it just missed parting his red hair.

Another slug forced him to duck back behind the Continental as lights went on in the apartment hotel, exposing him further. He heard voices, the slamming of two car doors and leapt back into action. But the powerful Jensen motor caught and the car spurted away without lights. He emptied his clip at it, hoping to put it out of action as he had stopped the Jaguar the night before . . .

. . . but this night his luck was out.

Sirens cut the night air as two police cars closed in on the block, but by then the Jensen had slipped through and was on its way. Shayne holstered his empty Colt and waited.

Paramedics were quick behind the police to tend to the injured Willets, who was still out cold. Shayne reported what had happened and led a pair of car-cops to the elevator. While they waited, the corporal in charge asked the redhead if he had got any sort of look at the attackers.

"Nothing that would stand up in court," he replied. This was, he thought, at least literally true. But he *had* caught a brief

make on the man from the garage. The fleeing man had been thick of body and his nose was hooked. But this was hardly information that would help the police.

The door to Mike Shayne's apartment yawned open and the big detective pushed his way inside. At first glance after he switched on the lights, all looked serene. Not for some seconds did he spot the figure seated in his favorite armchair turned toward the TV away from the door.

It was Painter's treacherous lieutenant, Linkletter, and he had died a most unpleasant death—garroted by a piece of steel wire sunk deep in his neck, with a wooden pivot peg behind his left ear . . .

XI

IT WAS CLOSE to 12:30 a.m. by the time the coroner got the body out of Mike Shayne's apartment. He had refused an offer to have a guard posted outside his door and promised to report for a further statement later that morning. Peter Painter, over the phone, had been livid.

"So help me, Shayne, if I find you had anything to do with Linkletter's murder, I'll nail your hide to the wall. I wanted him."

"Petey!" The redhead put aggrievement in his voice. "I thought we were in this together. Buddy-buddies to the end."

"I'll buddy-buddy you when I get my hands on you," the choleric Miami Beach chief promised.

"Tsk, tsk, Petey. Not so *loud*!"

He hung up, leaving his old foeman speechless for once . . .

Now, alone, Shayne paced the living room carpet, seeking some sense behind the placing of the crooked cop's body in his apartment. Had he not returned when he did, he might have had at least temporary difficulty in clearing himself of implication in the crime. The gunfire downstairs, plus the knocked-out desk clerk had left his skirts clean.

Even if it had come off without interference, it could hardly have tied him up for long with the police—no more than a few hours. Thus, a serious frame was out. Nor was a grim practical joke likely.

So what had been the purpose of the body dumping?

There seemed only one possible motive. Linkletter's body had been dumped because it had to be got rid of somewhere. So why dump it on him?

The answer was simply to tie him up for those few extra hours with the police . . . which

meant that whoever was behind the murder, probably the other shooting as well, needed those few hours.

For what?

The redhead was pondering this when the telephone rang. He was tempted not to answer it, having no desire for another brush with Painter. But the ringing persisted and, ultimately, he picked up the instrument from its cradle on the coffee table.

"Mike?" It was Diana.

"Yes, Diana—what gives?"

"I got hold of Ellen Fabian after a concert just now. She had a lot to say about Marci Falter. Called her a mystery woman—but liked her. There's quite a lot. May I come over?"

"Where are you?"

"At an Owl drug store about four blocks away."

"Got wheels?" he asked.

"Rented."

"Come on. Park the car here. I'll meet you downstairs."

She was just pulling into the curb behind the Buick Shayne had left parked outside the building when he emerged, giving a nod to the cop on temporary duty at the hotel switchboard. He held open the door of his vehicle until she scrambled inside, then walked around it and got himself settled behind the wheel.

He said as he pushed the



starter, "What was Marci Falter's maiden name?"

"Vecchio. Mrs. Fabian seemed to think—"

Mike Shayne slammed the steering wheel with the heels of both hands. "Vecchio—Marciana Vecchio! Of course! Big Jim Vecchio's niece!"

"It means something?"

"You're damn right it does!" The redhead got the Buick under way. "But it was so damned long ago. You ought to remember it. Five-six years back, when Big Jim was reported dead, your company refused to pay life insurance. Something like two million clams. It's beginning to tie up."

"I must have been still in the service," said Diana. "Who was he?"

"A retired mob chief out of Cleveland who settled here. He had plenty of bread, but things didn't go so well. So he took out a big policy with Triple-A and then, three months or so later, burned up in his garage. The papers were on his body but nothing else to identify. I didn't work on the case but I heard about it."

"What about the teeth?" Diana asked as they took a corner on two wheels. "Couldn't they be identified?"

Big Jim didn't have any of his own—one hundred percent dentures. They panned out okay, but your people still didn't like the smell of it—and I don't blame them."

"My God, Mike, that's got to be it!" Diana put it together. "If he's still alive, it explains the vendetta on the company. I take it Vecchio's claim is still unsettled."

"If he *is* still alive," said Shayne, "Big Jim has certainly laid low ever since. 'Uncle Jim'—I could boot myself around the block for not nailing it earlier. No wonder Marci looked familiar—but I associated her with her uncle, if he *is* really her uncle. Oh-oh..."

"Something wrong?" Diana asked.

"Depends how you read it," the redhead told her. "Big Jim

used to have a bodyguard who went everywhere with him. I saw them together a few times in the clubs. A thick-chested muscle man with a big beak. They called him 'The Undertaker.' I never did hear his name."

"It *has* to be it," Diana reiterated. "He gets this electronics whiz kid Falter married to Marci to save him from serving a term in Philly, brings them down here and sets it up. Triple-A refuses to pay his life insurance, so he gets it out of the company another way—by rigging those hotel jewel thefts."

"Right." Shayne nodded as they speeded up on an empty straightaway. "He plants one helper in Petey Painter's force—Linkletter—and another in the Triple-A office."

"Eve Coulter." Diana nodded her blonde head. "Plus the fact he's got his nephew-in-law tapping the company computer records with some kind of a little blue box. Jesus, Mike—it's beautiful."

"It was," he assured her, "until two things went wrong the other night—Herky Byles got onto the heist at the Mirabeau and Eve Coulter tipped you off indirectly."

"Mike—do you suppose she's all right?"

"That," he replied, "is what

I'm going to try to find out right now."

As the Buick approached the cypress-girt Jeremy Falter estate, he slowed down from a fast 79 miles per hour to a modest 15. Even more slowly, they cruised past the low hill-top villa. Through the gates, which offered the only clear view, the detective could see no undue lights or signs of nocturnal activity.

He uttered a short, sharp expletive.

"Something wrong?" Diana inquired.

"Nothing that shows," he replied. "That's what's wrong."

XII

SLOWLY, MIKE SHAYNE drove past the front entrance to the Falter estate, seeking some port of entry that would admit him without raising an alarm. Not that he expected to find any open doors—but he had cracked many a similar tough nut in his years as a private investigator.

A narrow alley ran along the far side of the house and grounds. On its right side, the double palisade of cypress and link steel chain fence continued over the narrow rise beyond which lay the small marina. The redhead pulled into the alley, drove far enough so as to

be out of sight from the street and stopped.

"What are you going to do?" Diana asked.

"Try to find a way in without setting off the bells," he told her, opening the door on his side quietly and slipping out. I want you to wait—

The blonde claims investigator was already out the right hand door of the car. Shayne opened his mouth to protest when he remembered her cool-headedness on the other side of the bay.

He said, "I hope you're carrying your revolver. You may need it."

"I hope you're carrying yours," she retorted softly.

Touché!

They moved silently up the alley, seeking some sort of side entrance. They breasted the low rise of the artificial hill, saw the glimmer of water ahead of them—securely barred by another link chain gate.

Mike Shayne halted and studied the barrier of cypress trees backed by metal fence on their right. Turning to Diana, he said, his voice low, "Can you climb a tree?"

"It's been some little while," she replied. "Besides, it's not easy to climb a cypress—and if that fence is wired, look out."

"We've got to get in there," he muttered. "The only reason

hey'd try to tie me up with Linkletter's body is to gain time for a getaway."

"Shouldn't there be some noise?" Diana asked.

As if her question were a clue, there were a succession of humps from within the Falter garage, whose rear wall was but a few feet from from them on the other side of the double fence. A strange baritone growled, "Jeses, we ain't got all night."

A heavy scraping sound followed.

Shayne put a finger to his ips, led the way back to the Buick. Removing his jacket and dropping it inside the car, he crawled up on the hood, hence to the roof. His six-feet-plus, atop the six feet of Buick altitude, gave him a four-foot clearance over the top of the steel link fence, whose height he had visually estimated at approximately seven and a half feet.

Taking breath, he leaped from the car roof to the closest tree, grasping its thick, tapering foliage tightly with both arms and thighs. It was rough, scraping his face, but he managed to get a firm grip.

The tree first inclined toward the car roof from which the detective had jumped. Then, its elasticity brought a counter reaction, swaying toward the

link fence on its other side like a vaulter's pole.

The effect was whiplike, and Shayne was hurled forward, up and beyond the metal barrier. Letting go, he was tossed over and inside, landing with mind-jarring impact on the turf below and beyond.

For long moments, he lay perfectly still in the half crouch that had been his landing position. He couldn't have moved if he wanted to. He was too shaken up by the impact of his two hundred-odd pounds on the solid turf. He only hoped the thump of his landing had not been observed.

Slowly, he got to his feet, dusting himself off. He had barely straightened when another body came flying through the air to land on the lawn five feet from him coiled in a ball that rolled and came upright to reveal a seemingly unshaken Diana Lee with her pants suit apparently unruffled.

"How'd you do it?" he whispered.

"I took gym," she replied in kind.

"Be careful," he warned, moving toward the garage in the shadow of the fence. Out of the corner of an eye, he noted that Diana had her five-shooter in hand, checked his own Colt in its holster.

There were further noises

from the garage. A door was opened, casting a large rectangle of light on the crushed stone driveway and parking area it opened on. Shayne and Diana halted just outside the patch of light it made, then moved close against the side of the building.

A large dark-blue van backed slowly out and turned so that it could be driven toward the house fifty yards beyond. Shayne motioned Diana to cover the garage behind him while he followed the van to the Falter villa. He was grateful for the clumps of landscaped shrubbery that offered him at least partial cover.

But not enough. As the van halted before the front door, another shape appeared suddenly around the side of the dwelling and said, "Okay, Shayne—drop the gun."

Mike Shayne went into evasive action, crouching as he leaped sideways and pivoted in mid-air, coming out of it with his big .45 aimed directly at the belly of the thick-chested man with the beaked nose. The so-called Undertaker had a pistol in his own right hand, which spat fire and bullets twice before the detective could return fire.

The Undertaker's two shots came close—one put a crease in the redhead's rib cage, just in-

side his upper left arm, the other whined close by his right ear before it smashed one of the villa windows behind him.

Shayne made a dive behind the nearest shrub as another bullet split the air just behind him. He heard The Undertaker utter a curse as he rolled behind the bush, his grazed side giving him fits. He managed to come up on one knee just in time to send a single bullet at his would-be killer, who had decided to make his move in the opposite direction, bringing them face to face.

A large hole appeared in the burly mobster's forehead, almost dead center. He seemed to keep coming at Shayne, who prepared to fire another round, then halted as blood and brains spurted over his face and collapsed suddenly like an emptied sack.

Shayne heard another series of shots from the garage area and raced back there—to find Diana standing with smoking gun over a man who moaned pitifully and gripped his left thigh as if he were trying to break it off at the hip.

Somebody near the front of the house opened up on the two intruders with a rifle. It sounded to the detective like a .22, and the *thock* of one of the bullets against the garage wall made him aware that these

were explosive slugs, capable of slowing his head from his shoulders.

"Fan out!" he ordered, motioning toward the shrubbery cover he had just vacated and moving toward the front lawn.

There was plenty of light and sound from the villa now. Shayne heard a female—probably Marci—utter a string of Italian oaths. For a moment, he thought he saw her in silhouette against a front window and hesitated, nerving himself to put a bullet in her.

But suddenly another female silhouette—Diana's—relieved him of the responsibility as it brought down the butt of a revolver on the back of Marci's head.

Shayne caught the reflection of light on a gun barrel in the van and this time had no compunction about firing. He shot it neatly out of the van-driver's hands, causing him to utter a yelp of anguish.

XIII

MIKE SHAYNE RACED to the van, pulled the driver out roughly and let him fall to the driveway on his face, where the impact of the crushed stone knocked the man cold. After checking him for other arms and retrieving his rifle from the van's driving compartment, the redhead

moved toward the house, from which Diana was shepherding a resigned looking Jeremy Falter with his hands held high and a fat female servant, who was crossing herself and uttering prayers.

"Nice going," he told his partner. "Cover them for a moment. I want a look inside the van."

Falter uttered a bleat of protest, quickly stilled by a meaningful flourish of Diana's revolver.

Shayne pulled at the rear door handle of the vehicle, which gave readily under the pressure. He pulled it open and found himself blinking at a windowless but brightly lit interior. For a long moment, he could not believe what lay in front of him.

Within was one of the most elaborate coffins he had ever viewed. It was white and gold, elaborate as a rococo altarpiece in some Middle European seventeenth century chapel. Vaulting inside, he went to it, found himself looking down on the perfectly preserved body of Big Jim Vecchino, readily recognizable from the photograph he had seen on his previous visit to the Falter home.

So perfect was the embalming beneath the coffin's glass cover that he half-expected the retired mobster from Cleveland

to rise up and reprove him for disturbing his sleep.

Behind the coffin was an equally elaborate small altar, also of elaborate white and gold. Atop it was a big jewel casket glowing with precious and semi-precious stones. Edging around the coffin, Shayne opened it up.

He was not especially surprised at its contents—the six jeweled elephants and the statue of St. Estatius in the throes of martyrdom told the story...

Shayne heard the sound of police sirens further shattering the shredded silence of the Bal Harbour night. He glanced at the garage, noted the upstairs window whose curtain had seemed to flutter during his previous visit to the Falter estate.

"Can you hold the fort till they get here?" The detective jerked his head toward the sirens' sounds.

"Why not?" Diana countered. "It had to be murder."

The redhead ran to the garage in giant steps, found the staircase with a lightswitch alongside, turned it on and took the stairs three at a time. The upper story held a chauffeur's suite—bath, parlor, bedroom. The girl lay on the bed, regarding Shayne with large frightened eyes.

Gently, he removed the tape that gagged her, said, "Eve Coulter?"

The girl nodded, whimpered a bit as he untaped her wrists and ankles. He said, "It's all right now—you're going to be okay. The police are almost here."

"*Thank God!*" she gasped, then burst into tears. By the time he got her downstairs, two police cars were parked in the driveway, the grill of one of them bashed in from the impact of crashing through the front gate...

* * *

It was close to noon by the time Angus MacLynne, pipe in mouth, heard the conclusion of their verbal report.

He shook his head, said, "I congratulate you both, of course, on a remarkable achievement, but a few angles still puzzle me. For one thing, how in hell did they expect to get away with it?"

"They had a chartered plane waiting at a private airport," Shayne replied. "They were traveling light, apart from Big Jim in his coffin—just the jewels and a few essentials were packed and in the van. Then it was off to Brazil, where it seems the Vacchino clan has some connections in very high

places. I understand Interpol is extremely interested in that end of it."

"That's not quite what I meant, Shayne," said MacLynne. "What puzzles me is why they didn't try to collect on their policy with us when Vecchino finally did die."

"How could they?" the redhead retorted. "They'd have had the extra corpse to account for. And that would have taken one hell of a lot of explaining."

The claims chief nodded, then shook his head. "Why embalm the old boy anyway?"

"Labor of love," said the detective. "It seems Gaetano Borzini—that's the big-nosed hit-man I had to shoot—wasn't called 'The Undertaker' for nothing. He was a genius at preserving corpses as well as creating them."

"How long ago did you say Vecchino died?"

"Only a couple of months ago," said Diana. "They didn't dare bury him here for fear the law would exhume him in case anything went wrong. Seems they wanted him planted for keeps—holy ground and all that—and they couldn't do that in Miami... not very safely anyway."

"So it was off to Brazil with him." MacLynne nodded. "And he's been living under cover all these years."

"Not exactly in solitary," Shayne told his employer. "Actually, he had damned good reason to stay dead. It seems he was marked for a rubout by the Mafia high command when he tried to shake the rackets and retire to Miami. That was why he used a borrowed body as his own."

"I wonder who it was."

"We'll probably never know. Jeremy Falter claims the old man and The Undertaker set the whole thing up. You know there are always unidentified bodies around. Maybe Gaetano killed him. Who can tell? There's nobody left to talk."

"I'm damned glad you got the girl—Eve Coulter—out all right, Shayne," said MacLynne. "How deeply do you believe she was involved in all this?"

"Only through family ties," Diana put in. "She was Marci's first cousin, and you know how strong the bonds are in Mediterranean families—or how strong they can be. I hope you'll see she gets another chance here, chief. After all, she did give me the tip that put Mike and me on the scene at the Mirabeau—and she might have paid with her life for that."

"I'm inclined to go along," said MacLynne. "Dammit, she's the most efficient computor-operator we have in the office." He rose, put down his

pipe, extended a hand to them both in turn, added, "Again, congratulations on an incredible achievement. And, Shayne, you might stop at the cashier's office on your way out."

Diana left with him. When she saw the size of his check, she shook her blonde head, said, "I think I'm on the wrong end of this line of work."

Shayne laughed, said, "But you get paid every week."

"Twice a month," Diana spoke wistfully.

"Okay, Diana," Shayne suggested, "what do you say we go out and spend some of this? We've got it coming."

"Oh, Mike!" She all but wailed it. "I'd love to—but would you believe it? I'm catch-

ing a plane for Toronto at two-fifteen. The company is taking an awful beating on fire claims there."

"Arson?"

"Probably. Anyway, darn it, I've barely got time to get back to the hotel and pack."

While they waited for the elevator, Mike Shayne took both her hands, then bent and kissed her. He was aiming for her forehead, but her lips rose to meet his full on.

It was quite a kiss. But then, Shayne thought regretfully as he left her in the foyer downstairs, it was one hell of a lot of woman. He decided to buy Lucy a silk Ann Klein scarf she had mentioned on his way back to the Flagler Street office.



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DEATH ON THE MOVE

The irrepressible team of detectives, Kowalski and Cohen, must run down a lady killer through a C-B Band jungle before he can strike again.

by DONAL BUCHANAN

"OKAY, I'M THROUGH." The medical examiner stood up creakily. His dew-soaked trousers were a crumpled mess. The pasty-gray color of his face could have resulted from the inadequate lighting provided by police flashlights and a distant street light.

He joined the circle of four policemen and one detective around the headless nude body lying in the grass. In the darkness near the road another detective was trying to lose the contents of an already dry

stomach. An occasional car whirred by on the highway.

Barney Kowalski forced himself to stare down at the poor mutilated ruin. "What can you tell us, Doc?"

"Barney, anything I say now is off the cuff," said the ME, "I'll do better once we get her to the lab."

"I know that, Doc. Give!"

"Well . . . we have here a white female probably in her late twenties. Height about five six. She probably weighed about one-twenty. Unless she



dyed her hair, she was--a
brunette."

"When did she die?"

"Hard to tell. I'd guess not

more than two or three hours
ago. It is one a.m. now. That
means it could have happened
as long ago as ten p.m." The

thin, bespectacled man peered up at Barney. "I can tell you one thing, though. She wasn't killed here."

Barney nodded. "Yeah," he said.

"You knew that?" The ME looked a bit pained.

"Hell, Doc," said Barney, "even a rookie could see there's not enough blood here. Let's get on with it. Was she sexually assaulted?"

"Won't know till later, but there are no overt signs that she was."

"What killed her?"

"A knife—and whoever used it was a sadistic butcher! I counted fifteen penetrations, five of them serious enough to cause death. There may be more. Will that be all?"

"Yeah, Doc. Thanks."

As the ME left, Bolivar Cohen came staggering out of the darkness wiping his ashen face with a handkerchief. He was a big man, topping Barney's six feet by four inches.

"Did you get it out of your system, Bo?" asked Barney.

"I don't think I'll ever get it out of my system!" snapped Bolivar. "God! I thought I'd seen some messy things in 'Nam, but never anything like this. Who would do such a hideous thing? How could it happen?"

"Maybe she lost her head

over a man!" cracked one of the older cops.

Barney winced. "Sullivan, you got no respect! For that, you get to hang around here until the techs are through. And you escort her to the morgue and observe the autopsy. Then hustle the report to me—along with her personal effects . . ."

"Hell, Loot—she ain't got no personal effects that I can see."

"Well, you an' the techs can beat the bushes. There's gotta be *something* we can go on. C'mon, Bo, let's get out of here."

Sullivan groaned.

Bolivar put his hand on Barney's shoulder. "Just a minute, Barn." He turned to Sullivan. "Jim, I noticed a set of pretty deep tire-tracks back there. Be sure the techs get those." Sullivan nodded.

The two detectives walked toward their '72 Plymouth parked on the grass just off the road, a lonely two-lane stretch of highway that chopped through the wild flatlands on the southern outskirts of the city. Barney let Bo take the wheel. He pulled the red flasher off the roof and slumped down in the passenger seat. He laced and unlaced his fingers—a sure sign of cogitation. Bo swung the car onto the road.

An ambulance roared towards them from the city, its siren dying to a moan as it slowed to stop.

"Those poor suckers are in for a shock," said Bo. "Say, Barn, how'd she come to be found so fast? She was back from the road in that tall grass."

"Someone called it in on the CB emergency band. They weren't specific—just said something funny was goin' on here. Sullivan and his partner found her. Probably somebody saw the body being dumped." Barney hit the dash with his fist. "Bo, I got a bad feeling about this. I think we're dealing with a psycho."

"Yeah," muttered Bo. "And who can figure a nut? Wonder what he did with the head?"

"And where was she killed?" asked Barney. "I can't see him doin' it in the car, then driving off with the head!"

"Aw, Barn, if he's psycho, he's liable to do anything!"

"And why are we saying 'him'? A woman coulda done it."

"You really believe that?"

"Hell, no—but we gotta consider it anyhow."

They worried the case for the rest of their shift, but got no answers. Neither detective slept well that night.

At ten a.m. Bolivar was awoken by the phone. "I'm

not here!" he shouted into the receiver. "I've gone to Florida!"

"Knock it off, Bo, and get over here," Barney's voice crackled. "They've found where she was killed."

Bo slammed down the telephone and reached for his clothes. Ten minutes later he picked up Barney at his apartment.

Cal's Cool Campers was a large auto lot on the edge of town, specializing in recreational vehicles. The two detectives pulled up next to two caps and a civilian standing beside a Dodge motor-home parked on the lot. As they got out of the car, the civilian approached.

"I am Calbert Buffey, gentlemen. I presume you are the detectives they sent for?"

They admitted to it and announced their names.

He pulled them towards the door of the camper. "This vehicle was here when we opened up this morning. It wasn't here when we closed at seven thirty last night. It isn't one of ours, because all of ours are kept in the fenced lot overnight. We went inside—it wasn't locked—and it was horrible! Blood all over the place! Naturally, we called the police at once."

Barney looked at the cops. One said, "That's right, Loot. It's a mess in there."

They entered a door just back of the driving area and found themselves in a small lounge/kitchen. The cabinets and fittings were of the best.

"Plush," said Barney. "Where's the blood?"

"Back here." Buffey led them down a short hall past bookshelves that seemed to hold only lurid porno books and magazines. Further down were a toilet and shower. The entire rear of the camper was filled by a large, comfortable bed with fluffy pillows. Lacy curtains shaded the one-way glass windows. He flicked on a light which reflected garishly from a mirror in the ceiling.

The silken sheets were so gory that you could hardly tell that their original color was gold. The walls and curtains were spattered with blood.

"You're right, Barney," said Bo. "This has got to be the place."

"Yeah," replied Kowalski. "Now, where's the rest of her?" He began opening cabinets in the hall, then stopped.

"Bo—"

"Yeah, Barn?" Bo and Buffey stepped over and peered around Kowalski into the broom closet he had opened. There, impaled on a mop handle, was the missing head.

"My God!" gagged Buffey. He stumbled out of the camper.

"At least it wasn't you, this time," said Barney.

"That's because I'm numb!" Bo replied. "Looks like Doc was right. She was a brunette—and pretty, too. Say, Barn, take a look at this!"

A message was scrawled in blood on the inside of the closet door—*ALPHA*.

Barney nodded. "I'll finish up here, Bo. You get Doc and the techs here fast—and arrange to have the head transported to the morgue as soon as we're through with it."

Two hours later, they sat in a diner and compared notes.

"That layout was really posh," Bo remarked. "It must have cost a fortune. Maybe she's a rich kid who had the bad luck to pick up the wrong hitchhiker."

"According to the driver's license in that purse we found in there, her name was Mary Lee Jacobs. She was twenty-five. No occupation listed. Her address is local, but not in the rich district by a long shot. It's on the tender end of Loyne Street. Did you happen to notice one thing about that motor home?"

"What?"

"It has a CB."

"So? Most of them do these days . . ." Then Bo looked shocked. "You mean—"

"Yeah. I think the nut called

in his own crime—from a safe distance, of course!"

Bo shook his head in wonderment. "You know, Barn, this 'alpha' business bothers me. Do you think he's gonna go through the whole alphabet?"

"That haunts me, too."

"He could be a military man—you know, phonetic alphabet and all."

"Sure, or a cop. We use it too, y'know. Or he could be a Greek."

"What's our next move?"

"We check out her address."

The address on Loyne turned out to be a sleazy hotel of the sort catering to down-at-the-heels traveling men, old pensioners, and tired hookers. The desk clerk spotted them for fuzz the second they walked in the door.

He was an unappetizingly gross lump of flesh who so filled his cubicle that he appeared to have grown there. He wore no jacket, an open-collared shirt, and suspended trousers. This, not to mention the beer clutched in one beefy paw, proclaimed that he knew the joint lacked class and didn't give a damn. He peered at Kowalski and Cohen belligerently.

"Whaddaya want? I run a good place here. Just ask the beat cop . . ."

Barney raised his hands in supplication. "Cool it, cool it.



Don't go off half-cocked. Does a girl named Mary Lee Jacobs live here?"

The clerk looked honestly puzzled. "Nah. I know all the dames here. There ain't no Mary Jacobs."

Barney described her.

The desk clerk's face went blank. Something flickered behind his eyes. His next words were reluctant. "Yeah—you must mean Ginger Lee. She ain't in now. What's she done?"

"Nothin'," said Bo. "How about letting us see her room?"

"Hey, I don't know about that," blustered the fat man. "Ain't you supposed to have a warrant or something . . .?"

Barney reached across the

desk and grabbed a handful of shirt. "Friend, we're from Homicide and you wouldn't want to obstruct justice, now, would you? How about it?"

"Okay—okay. Two hundred three," sweat beaded his porcine nose and cheeks. "But she shares that room with another girl who might be there now." He handed Barney a key.

"Stay put—and stay off the phone!" warned Bo as he and Barney headed for the stairs.

At room 203 there was no answer to their knock, so they used the key and entered. The room looked lived in the way that only two rather messy and uncaring single females can leave a room.

There were twin beds, a single large dresser with a mirror, a small table and a couple of well-worn easy chairs. Clothes hung in the closet, but were also draped casually everywhere else. The tiny bathroom was festooned with drying pantyhose. Letters lay on the dresser addressed to Ginger Lee and to a Cindy Masters.

One envelope, addressed to *Jenny Baker*, had the address crossed out. Someone had marked it *Return to sender*. The sender had not given his name, but the return address was out of state. Barney and Bo noted all this and carefully searched the premises. They found a

photo album that belonged to Ginger and little else. They took the album and her letters.

Using the room phone, Barney put in a call to the department. A few minutes later he replaced the receiver and called to Bo, who was rummaging in the top of the closet.

"Leave it, Bo. We're finished here. There'll be a crew along in a bit and we'll have a man on the place so we won't miss Cindy Masters. Incidentally, we now know what these ladies do for a living. Ginger has a record as a hooker from 'way back. It figures that Cindy is one too."

"Both working out of one room? And from the looks of things there must have been a third girl here," Bo exclaimed. "What'd they do, work shifts?"

"No, Bo," answered Barney. "We saw Ginger's 'office' already. What we have here, obviously, is the home base of at least one mobile whore—and possibly two or three."

Bo's eyes grew round. "The oldest profession has some new wrinkles! How do they get their customers? Flag 'em down on the highway? Maybe that jerk downstairs pimps for 'em?"

Barney scratched his head. "Maybe. At any rate, he's got some questions to answer. They may be working for him or for whoever provided that expen-

sive set of wheels. These gals generally work the truck-stops—but I think this bunch has come up with a new turn."

"What's that?"

"CB. I think they meet their customers on the airways."

"Hey, yeah! That could be it. Then our murderer must own a CB."

"It's possible," said Barney. "C'mon, let's question the rest of the people in this dump. We might get lucky."

"Since we're dealing with a fruitcake, that's probably the only way we'll ever get him," muttered Bo.

They left the room and entered the dimly lighted hall, which was carpeted with a frayed 'Persian' rug made in Belgium. There were ten rooms on the floor. The locks on three doors were broken and the rooms were empty. They showed no signs of recent occupancy. Four more were locked and there was no answer to their knocks.

They were luckier at 205, next door to 203. The door opened on a chain lock and a tiny, apple-cheeked face crowned with snowy hair above merry blue eyes showed itself between the door and the jamb.

"Yes?" chirped the lady who owned this vision of geriatric loveliness.

Barney identified them and

asked about "the girls next door."

The door closed and the chain lock removed. Then the door opened wide. A spry, slim little lady in her younger seventies stood before them. She wore a very up-to-date and well-fitted beige pantsuit.

"How exciting!" she said. "You must come right in. I hope the girls aren't in any trouble. They've always been very kind to me. We're really good friends. Please sit down. Will you have some tea?"

Barney and Bo could see that this was more like an efficiency apartment than a room. The furniture was tasteful and the room was as lovely and ageless as its occupant—whose name, she said, was Mrs. Ruth Juergen. He and Bo sank into a comfortable couch and Mrs. Juergen perched perkily on a straight chair in front of them. They woefully declined the tea. Mrs. Juergen looked disappointed.

"I hardly ever have any visitors, you see. It would have been nice . . ." She straightened up and, placing her hands together in her lap, spoke directly to Barney. "All right, to business then. What can I do for you?"

"Do you see the girls next door often, ma'am?" Barney asked.

"Oh, yes. Every day. Not in the evening or night, of course. They work then."

"And . . . uh . . . are you acquainted with the nature of their . . . their work?"

"Why, certainly, young man," her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Wasn't born yesterday y'know! They follow an ancient and well-established profession. But they are good, kind girls all the same and I am proud to call them friends.

"They do my washing for me and all sorts of little errands that make life pleasanter—at least Ginger and Cindy do. There was a third girl with them for a while . . . Jenny, I think her name was. She was a mess. On those awful drugs.

"Ginger and Cindy took her in for a bit and we all tried to help her . . . uh . . . 'kick the habit' I think you say . . . but it was no use. She finally overdosed and died. I believe it was in the papers. Happened at some party where a lot of drugs were being used."

"I remember that, Barn," said Bo. "It was at that pusher's pad a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh yeah," replied Barney. "They locked up the jerk didn't they? They raided the place before he could get rid of her body. Some neighbor called. Narco handled it."

"That was it," said Mrs.

Jerugen. "That was what happened. Poor girl. But we could all see it coming. She was just no good to herself or anybody else. She had a very strict upbringing . . . too strict, apparently, and just decided to kick over the traces and went from one mistake to the other." She shook her head. "There's so much of that, these days . . ."

"Do Ginger and Cindy ever use drugs, Mrs. Juergen?" asked Barney.

"Oh, no. Of course, I can't say for certain, but I'm sure that they'd never do it. In fact, Ginger told me once that it was bad for business. Why don't you ask them yourselves? Cindy said she had to get her hair done before going to work, so you won't see her until tomorrow, but Ginger ought to be there. She usually looks in on me before this."

Barney looked uncomfortable. "She can't, Mrs. Juergen," he said quietly. "She's dead. We're investigating her murder."

Ruth Juergen's straight little body sagged. She stood up and walked stiffly to the window and stood for a bit with her back to them.

"Mrs. Juergen . . ."

She turned. Her face was wet with tears. "I do so hate people t—that lose control, don't you? Why did it have to happen to that fine girl? Does Cindy know

yet? How did it happen?" She returned to her chair and sat down in it.

Barney explained as much as he felt she should know. He didn't mention the decapitation. "Now, is there any way you can help us? Did you see Ginger yesterday? Do you happen to know what she planned to do or who she planned to see?"

Mrs. Juergen shook her head. Her hands clenched and unclenched in her lap. "No. I—I saw Ginger, yes, but I didn't know where she planned to go or who she planned to see. I never pry. Maybe that is why they became my friends. I can ask Cindy when I see her tomorrow, if you want."

"Do you know any of Ginger's friends or steady customers?" asked Bo.

"No—like I said, I don't like to pry."

Barney stood. "Thank you, Mrs. Juergen. If you think of anything, we'll have a man outside Ginger's door in the hall for awhile. Just tell him and he'll get it right to us. C'mon, Bo."

Outside her door, Bo muttered, "What's a nice, sweet little old dame like her doin' in a dump like this?"

Barney grimaced. "Poor old gal probably can't afford anything better. You know how little social security amounts to.

We've got one more room on this floor. Let's try it."

They knocked on the door of 208. Almost immediately, the door was opened wide to reveal a large, lean man in his fifties with a face which could have been carved out of frozen vinegar. He wore a black suit with a white shirt and string tie. His tight little mouth creaked open. "Yes?"

Barney and Bo identified themselves and went into their spiel. The man shook his head emphatically.

"Nawp. Don't know nothin' about them gals. Handmaidens of the devil, if you ask me! Temptin' good men away from the path of righteousness! I only been here a few days, but I know their kind. Haven't said nary a word to 'em and don't intend to. They deserve anythin' that happens to 'em!"

"What makes you think something has happened to them?" queried Barney sharply.

The man was taken back, then said, "Stands to reason, don't it? When the minions of Caesar come nosin' about after a body, somethin's either happened to 'em or is *about* to happen to 'em!"

"You say that you have only been here a few days?" asked Bo.

"Yep. Got here last Monday. Thought I'd drop in on my

bishop." He drew his lanky frame up proudly. "I am the Reverend Thomas Barlow, sir. A minister of God in the Church of the Everlastin' Lord. It ain't a big church, but we like it that way. I got my call twenty years ago and have been chasin' sinners and savin' souls ever since."

The man could give them no further information. Barney thanked him and he closed his door, leaving them standing in the hall.

It took them the rest of the afternoon to check out the residents of the five-story hotel. Some were cooperative (when it was made clear that they were not the targets of investigation), others were hostile. No new information was developed. Back on the second floor, the patrolman now standing in front of 203 reported that the technicians had come and gone, but no Cindy.

"What now, Barn?" asked Bo.

"We go see a friend of mine," Kowalski replied.

Barney took the wheel and drove them out to the northern suburbs, turning off the north-south highway into a large development full of postage-stamp lots and identical, boxy, asbestos-shingled cottages. Barney pulled up in front of one of them.

The steps leading to the front

door were covered by a strong wooden ramp with side rails. A cheerful voice answered their knock. "Come on in. It's not locked."

They entered a small parlor where all the furniture seemed carefully lined against the walls to give the maximum amount of floor space. A small, middle-aged black man sat in a wheelchair in one corner, hunched over a table littered with electronic gear.

Bo noted an excellent transceiver of the sort used by CB base stations. The man grinned and waved at them when he recognized Barney. "Hi! What are you doin' out here? Lieutenant? Don't think I know your friend."

"Mike Callahan, meet Bolivar Cohen. Nice to see you, Mike. How's the dictionary coming?"

Mike turned his chair to face them. He had no legs. He grinned again. "It marches," he said. "It marches. Begorrah, a Spanish Jew teamed with an Irish Polack. Glad to know you, Cohen. I'm a mixture too—you might say I'm one of them *black Irish!*" He chuckled at his own joke. "Can I offer you gents a beer?"

Bo looked hopeful, but Barney said, "Thanks, no, Mike. This is a duty call." He turned to Bo. "I've known Mike about

ten years, since the hit-and-run that left him legless. I nailed the crumb that did it. Mike's some kind of electronic genius and lately he's been getting into CB. He's compiling a dictionary of CB lingo, so he listens to it most of the time."

"I see where you're headin'," said Bo.

"But I don't," said Mike. "How can I help you? Sit down and tell me all about it."

Barney and Bo sat. Barney briefly outlined the case they were on. "So you see, Mike, we need to get a line on the way these mobile mammas operates. Did you happen to be listening last night?"

"About what time?"

"Say, between eight and ten p.m.—make it eleven, just to be on the safe side."

"Yeah. Not only did I listen, I taped some good stuff. Mostly truckers, but there were a few dames. What's her handle?"

"Handle?"

"Yeah. You know, the name she uses on the air."

"Oh," said Barney. "We've got a couple of names, but I don't think we've got that yet."

"Well, lets see now . . ." Mike reached over to a shelf lined with tapes. "During that period last night we had quite a bit of action . . . Ah . . . these are the ones I want . . ." He consulted a notebook. "Okay. At eight-

fifteen, Tillie the Trucker came on. Don't think she's your gal. I met her and she's a straight arrow. Handles an eighteen-wheeler outa Detroit."

"Definitely not."

"Right. Then we got Swingin' Susie at eight twenty-nine. She was looking for beer company as I remember."

"That's a possible."

"Mmmh . . . Now, at nine ten we got Aura Lee."

"Orally?"

"No. A-U-R-A Lee, like the poem. But the thought could be there. She had a real sexy voice."

"Barney!" cried Bo. "That could be it. Mary Lee . . . Ginger Lee . . . Aura Lee! I'll bet that's our gal!"

"Yep," said Barney. "Let's hear that one, Mike. Any others?"

"Just one. Another sexy, come-hither dame who called herself Cinder Ella. She was on the air about ten thirty. I remember her 'cause she got no returns on her call that time. I'd heard her on the air earlier about seven p.m. and she made a date with some trucker to meet him at a truckstop north of town."

"That must be Cindy!" said Bo excitedly.

"Let's hear Aura Lee, now, Mike," said Barney.

Mike placed the seven-inch

reel on his Akai and pressed the fast-forward button while checking the counter. Finally he stopped it, grunting with satisfaction, and pressed 'play.'

A soft, breathy female voice filled the room.

"... You got *Aura Lee*. Come on... Say again, *Good Buddy*, you're breaking up..."

"Why can't we hear her caller?" asked Barney.

Mike stopped the recorder. "Whoever was calling her must have had a small set—possibly a hand-held job. He was close to her, but too far off for me to pick up his signal." He pressed 'play' again.

"... Okay, *Alpha Man*, that's better c'mon... You got a pooped-out pedaler in a portable pad... That's me, but I can't eyeball you. Are you over my shoulder?... Uh-huh... Hey, let's get together and split a brown bottle. D'you know the chew-an'-choke on the right just past the hole-in-the-wall? C'mon?... Okay, see you in five. Here's eighty-eights to you and *Aura Lee* is clear..."

Mike stopped the recorder. "Alpha Man!" breathed Barney. "Damn! I wish we could have heard him. Save that tape, Mike. That's our victim, all right, making a date with her murderer."

"Right, Barney," Mike rewound the tape and took it off

the machine. He boxed it and made a notation on the box. Then he handed it to Barney. "Here, you take it. I've noted down the counter numbers where you can find her message."

"Thanks, Mike," Barney turned to go. "C'mon, Bo."

Mike laid his hand on Barney's arm. "Say, are you guys interested in that *Cinder Ella* dame, too?"

"Yeah," said Barney. "We'd like to find her."

"Well, I just got her on tape again a little before you guys arrived—must have been about five thirty."

"Let's hear it."

Mike picked up a reel from the table top and fitted it onto his machine. He scrunched his brows together in thought, then held down the fast-forward button for about 15 seconds. Then he pushed the 'play' button.

"... This is *Careful Charlie* clear with his hammer down. Keep on truckin'...." There was a brief hiss of static, then a cheerful female voice gave some call letters and said, "... This is *Cinder Ella*, a bodacious beaver loose on big nineteen. Any-one got ears? C'mon." A male voice identified itself as Horrible Harold and tried to make a date. Cindy didn't buy it.

"... Now, *Horrible*. You ought to know I know your voice

by now. You were Lonesome Larry last week and I figure you're still a County Mounty—and I just left your stompin' grounds. So long, Horrible... If nobody can give this beaver some good numbers, she'll just have to put a cork in it. C'mon..."

There was a brief pause filled by a faint indiscernible gabbling. Cindy must have understood it, however, for she answered. "You must be barefoot, Cotton Picker, your signal's weak..." Gabble followed.

"What does she mean, 'barefoot'?" asked Bo.

"She means he's got a low-power CB, like the guy last night."

"But he was Alpha Man, not Cotton Picker."

"Shh! Cotton Picker's not a handle. It's like Good Buddy. Shut up. She's talking again."

"Aw, mercy, mercy, Omega Man! You vibe good, but let's eyeball each other over some road tar. What're you pushing? C'mon." Gabble.

"She says he sounds good, but she wants to check him out over a cuppa joe," Mike explained. "She's got the lingo all right."

"Okay, Omega Man, it's a date. I know the place. I'll bang a u... pun intended... an' see you there in twenty minutes. You'll recognize my rig. It's a

portable bedroom with twin mamas mounted rear. This is Cinder Ella clear. Keep the greasy side down and the shiny side up..."

Mike cut off the recorder. "I'd like to meet that girl. She could really add to my vocabulary," he said.

"In more ways than one," said Bo. "Say, what'd she mean by 'twin mamas'?"

"Two nine-foot antennas. She's got 'em on the rear bumper of her mobile home."

"My God!" cried Barney. "It's almost six. She must be with him now! Maybe she's late. Mike, can you raise her on that thing?"

"Sure." Mike turned to his set, flipped a switch and set the channel-selector carefully. He spoke into his microphone: "Breaker, Breaker nineteen, this is an emergency call." He gave his station designation and continued, "This is Black Elf calling Cinder Ella. C'mon..."

He repeated this two or three times with no results. He looked at Barney. "She's not on the air."

"We've got to find her or she's dead!" Barney cried.

"Let me try something," said Mike. He turned to his set. "This is Black Elf lookin' for Cinder Ella. She's drivin' a portable pad with twin mamas

mounted rear and banged a u-ee about thirty minutes ago. Who's got ears, c'mon?"

"Black Elf, this is Hangover Hal parked at a bean store on twenty-ninth. A portable pad with twin mamas banged a u-ee on my front awhile ago on twenty-nine and headed towards the hole in the wall. Don't know if it was your party, but a beaver was pushin' it and had the hammer down. Any help? Back."

"That's a big ten-four. Good numbers to you, Hangover Hal. This is Black Elf, clear." Mike turned to Barney. "That give you any ideas?"

"Yeah," Barney said. "Remember where Aura Lee met him? The chew-an'-choke on the right past the hole in the wall"—translation, please, Mike!"

"That would be Rosie's Diner. Going north through the Markham Tunnel it would be on the right."

"Thanks, Mike." Barney started to leave, then turned back while Bo went out to start the car. "They might leave there and be on their way before we can get to 'em. You keep trying to raise her, Mike, and if you do, try to get her to stop and get away from her vehicle.

"Tell her you're behind her and her rig is on fire or some-

thing. It might get us some time. I don't think the jerk will try anything out in the open." Mike nodded and Barney hurried out.

Siren screaming, they sped back to the highway. Barney muttered, "Damn! It'll take us ten minutes to get there from here!" He grabbed the mike. "Dispatch, this is King-two. We're in Seneca about to turn north on twenty-nine to Rosie's Diner. Murder suspect believed there with intended victim. Are any other units closer?"

Dispatch responded negative—no units closer than fifteen minutes due to rushhour traffic and other calls.

"Hellfire!" cried Barney. He pressed the mike button. "Get us at least two units there for backup as soon as you can. This is a code three!"

"Never a cop when you need one," said Bolivar, concentrating on his driving. "I hope that piece drinks slow coffee."

The minutes seemed to drag as they weaved their way north through heavy traffic, crashing through stoplights and narrowly missing cars and pedestrians.

The mile-long Markham Tunnel was choked with cars moving at a steady forty miles an hour. The clangor of their siren in the confined space reverberated endlessly.

"Turn that damn thing off," said Barney. "It won't do us any good in here."

Finally they emerged from the tunnel and could see Rosie's Diner about 600 yards ahead.

"There they are!" cried Bolivar. Sure enough, a large Dodge motor home had just turned out of Rosie's parking lot into the north-bound traffic. Barney could see the twin antennas mounted on the rear bumper. An army of commuter traffic surged between them.

"Hit that siren again, Bo," cried Barney. "C'mon, you turkeys, *move!* . . . Okay, Cindy Baby, turn on your CB . . . Damn, they're really movin'! Bo, we've gotta get this clunker to the shop. It can't cut it any more. Can't you step on it a little?"

"Don't bother me, I'm busy," muttered Bo as he whipped the Plymouth around an antique Chevy whose aged owner must have been deaf. "Hey, *look!* They're slowing down an' pulling over. Mike must have got through to her!"

The motor home drove onto the grassy verge on the right and stopped. A startlingly pretty blonde leaped out of the driver's side. Clutching a small fire extinguisher, she ran to the rear of the vehicle and peered under it.

A man climbed out the passenger door as the two de-

tectives screeched to a stop. He took one look at them and turned to run. Barney jumped out of the car, drew his thirty-eight and aimed it across the open door at the man.

"Move, *Reverend*, and I'll blow your head off!" The man froze, his hands in the air. "Go get him, Bo."

Bo frisked the man expertly, coming up with a ten-inch carving knife which he wrapped very carefully in a handkerchief. Cindy, who had stood by as if mesmerized, her eyes flicking from person to person, gasped when she saw the knife. Bo whirled the man around and handcuffed him. Face on, it was easy to recognize the vinegary visage of Thomas Barlow, their acquaintance from room 208.

Barney straightened up and walked over to Cindy. Sirens could be heard approaching Rosie's Diner. "Stick that turkey in the back seat, Bo, and send our backup home. We'll take him in ourselves." Bo waved and propelled the now listless Barlow towards the car.

Cindy had by now recovered some of her poise. She held the extinguisher with two hands, like a club. "What the hell is going on here? Are you busting me, too?"

Gently, Barney explained. Cindy's blue eyes grew big and round. Then her face crumpled.

Dropping the extinguisher, she clutched blindly at Barney and flooded his shoulder with tears.

"Mary . . . Ginger . . . dead . . . and, and me *next!* But *why?* We've never hurt anybody!"

Barney patted her back. "It's over now. You're safe. I don't know why he did it, Cindy." Then, a thought occurred to him. He disengaged himself and turned her face towards his. "Cindy, who was Jenny Baker's father?"

"Why . . . he . . . I think he's a preacher. I never met him. Jenny couldn't stand him. He's the reason she . . . You mean that's . . ." Horror filled her eyes as she jerked around to peer at the figure in the Plymouth.

"Yes," said Barney. "I think so. I'll bet his ID reads 'Baker' and not 'Barlow.' I think he blamed you two for Jenny's death."

"My God!" Cindy could think of nothing else to say.

At the end of their shift Bolivar drove Barney home. "Barn," he said. "How'd you

know it was the Rev? You couldn't see his face from where you were."

"You need to study our bible as well as yours, Bo," replied Barney. "You thought we were going to have a whole alphabet of murders. I knew who it was as soon as we heard Cindy talking to him on the CB. He never planned more than two. I am Alpha and Omega—I am the Beginning and the End."

"Pretty good," admitted Bo. "It sure is nice to *save* someone's life for a change. That nice old chick, Mrs. Juergen, will be happy."

"Oh yeah," said Barney. "I meant to tell you. I checked with Vice. That 'nice old chick' is the owner of that hotel and, incidentally, also owns those motor homes. She's a well-known madam they've been trying to pin down for years."

Bolivar turned towards him. "Doggone it! You can't trust anyone anymore!"

"Keep your eyes on the road, Bo. Let's keep the greasy side down and the shiny side up . . ."



Cindy could get dumb Willis to do just what she wanted. But there was a catch.

The
**BENT
TWIG**
by
**VIRGINIA
HART**

"CATCH A GOOD, FAT HEN, big Harry," Dorothy Mae called to her husband as he wriggled his long arms into the too-short sleeves of his winter jacket. "There's six of us eatin' today."

"Don't you all go to no trouble for me." Etta clawed at the air with a brown-spotted hand, as if trying to stop him. "I ain't company."

"Now you just let me, Etta." Dorothy Mae dug a well into



the flour she had heaped onto her board and broke an egg into it. "I dearly love to fuss over supper."

"She does," Harry growled. "You'd think old Jimmy Carter hisself was gonna sit at our table."

"Twouldn't bring no greater pleasure than havin' Etta here." Dorothy waited until her husband had stomped out, letting the door bang behind him, before she added, "Times was better in Memphis, before Harry commenced working on commission.

"Why, every Sunday was Thanksgiving. I'd bake two apple pies and a mince. Sometimes a lemon cream. There'd be two fat hens roasting and maybe a nice ham. More folks'd come by than did at the Governor's mansion."

"There ain't either six," little Harry piped up, his hand poised in the air, holding a piece of the jigsaw puzzle his sister was working in the middle of the sitting room floor. "There's seven, counting Willis."

"Willis don't count," the girl said, snatching away the puzzle piece and giving little Harry a shove that sent him flying into the coffee table.

Little Harry retaliated with a fist slammed onto the top of Cindy's head.

"Now Cindy." Dorothy Mae made a clucking sound with her tongue. "You don't have to be smart to get hungry. And Willis does get hungry."

The two women looked at the mountain of a boy who squatted in the corner next to the stove. His empty eyes stared back at them, but the corners of his lips lifted slightly in a half-smile.

"I wanna watch Daddy kill a chicken." Little Harry leapt into the kitchen, stumbling over Etta's foot, his face screwed up as if he wanted to be ready in case he had to cry to get his way. "I like to watch it dance when it gets its head chopped off."

"I'll watch *you* dance, I dearly will," Cindy screeched, "if you mess up my puzzle again. I'll *flatten* you, you little skunk."

Dorothy Mae winced. *I'll flatten you, you little skunk*, she echoed in her mind. Why did the children have to talk like that and act like that when there was company? Especially when it was a prim old biddy like Etta Eades, who thought children should sit on the sofa with their hands folded in their laps. Not ever having any children herself, she'd never understand.

"They don't act up no worse when somebody's here," Harry had argued the last time Dorothy Mae mentioned it to him. "It's just you notice it more when you look through an outsider's mind. It's how the twig is bent that grows the tree."

Always blaming her, he was—always!

"This child!" Dorothy Mae said, smiling as if it were a game they always played, as she struggled to jacket little Harry, but pinching him hard on the bottom where Etta couldn't see. "Always wanting to be like big Harry. Hold still now. Would you believe he wants a pipe like his Daddy smokes?"

"Give it to him! Maybe his lungs will get black and he'll die," Cindy muttered.

"Tsk, tsk." Dorothy Mae shook her head. "The things they teach our children in the schools these days!"

Oh, she'd love to whip that girl black and blue. At thirteen, Cindy was old enough to know you wanted to show your best side to company.

Little Harry darted out of Dorothy Mae's grasp before she could finish fastening his jacket. The big boy, Willis, stood up, as if hoping he'd be invited outside to join in the fun. But little Harry zipped by, slamming the door an inch from the older boy's nose, and Willis squatted down again.

Etta shook her head. "You're a saint, Dorothy Mae. Here, let me at least peel those potatoes. Taking in a babe, is one thing. But a big hulking boy? Not many'd do it. Course him bein'

blood makes a difference I suppose."

Dorothy froze. "Blood? Willis is not blood. Not even a drop. He's only in our family through marriage—and distant marriage at that."

"He is homely, ain't he?" Etta went on. "You'd have supposed the good Lord would have given him a handsome face to make up for his addled brain."

"I don't question the Lord," Dorothy Mae answered, shaping the biscuits she'd kneaded into a baking pan. "The Lord works in mysterious ways. Maybe that's why he struck down the boy's ma and pa in that fire.

"When I stand in front of the golden throne, I don't want to be stuttering about what good works I done here on earth." She reached for the bowl of potatoes. "Thank you kindly, Etta, for saving me so much trouble."

The old crow didn't know the proper way to do a potato even. She'd pared away as much potato as peel and had still managed to leave some black eyes behind.

"That's true," Etta said. "I go to church meeting every Tuesday and sew quilts for the missionaries to take to some savages somewhere who probably eat each other. But then they get cold too and it ain't really

their fault if the Lord's never spoke to 'em."

The door banged open against the inside wall as Harry stomped in, his nose scarlet. "Getting colder out there by the minute."

"Put that thing in the sink, for Heaven's sake, big Harry. You're dripping blood all over my clean floor."

Little Harry raced by and kneeled beside his sister, letting his jacket drop to the floor. "Now Cindy's gotta clean the messy old chicken we killed. *Ha, ha!*"

"I don't either, creep. Do I, Ma? I did the last one."

"You must learn the ugly part of womanly chores," Dorothy explained; in the warm voice she'd heard the mother on the Waltons use with her children. "As well as the dainty ones—like tea pouring and cookie baking."

"That's surely the truth," Etta agreed, pursing her lips. "There's more of the bitter than the sweet in this life."

"You're only too lazy to do it yourself," Cindy muttered, scattering the puzzle pieces with a flourish.

"You *stink!*" little Harry yelled. "I wanted to finish it, and you *ruined* it."

"Then start it yourself, creep."

Had Etta noticed her daugh-

ter had been sassy to her? Dorothy wondered. And little Harry—only eight years old—using words like *stink*. Their father would have to take a strong hold on them tonight after the woman had left.

"That chicken won't pluck itself," she cooed, with a threatening bulge of her eyes she hoped Cindy would catch.

"See if it don't pluck itself," Cindy said. "Just watch." She sauntered into the kitchen and sat at the table, pulling a face as if she were about to cry. "I dearly wish *somebody* would take that old chicken and pluck it for me. I do wish it. My hand has a bad cut on it."

Dorothy Mae shook her head. "Ain't she a sly one? Watch how she does this."

The big boy in the corner stood slowly, grinning widely at Cindy, who grinned back. He shuffled over to the sink and went to work on the chicken. Cindy put back her head and howled with laughter.

"You surely have that boy trained right," Etta marveled.

"But *we* didn't train him. It's only Cindy gets service. When he first came to live here, he heard Cindy's pa call her *Princess*—you know how he does? We figure he must take her as a real princess. He does everything to please her. Just to see her smile. She don't have

to lift a finger with Willis about."

"Might she not take advantage of the boy?" Etta asked, wrinkling her nose.

"A mite. But it pleases him. See his silly grin? And the way I look, a young lady should know how to deal with servants. Course we can't afford hired help now, but the day will come . . . It's an art, you know. Some folks let their servants take over the house. Lack of money don't mean lack of breeding."

"Don't I know!" Etta agreed. "My cleaning girl tried to tell me, 'I don't do windows.' I told her quick enough, 'Then you don't work for me.' So she does windows, sure enough."

The women laughed.

"Just watch this now," Cindy said, nodding toward Willis, who had finished the chicken and settled back into his corner. "I dearly wish *somebody* would fix me a nice bowl of cereal with cream and bananas in it."

"Now Cindy," Dorothy Mae began. "Supper's about—"

"Shh!" The girl held a finger to her lips.

Willis straightened up slowly and shuffled to the refrigerator. He brought out the cream and set to work slicing up a banana.

"I declare!"

"He's a silly robot," little

Harry said, walking stiff-legged, his arms outstretched.

"But he's ever so slow," Cindy whined.

Willis dropped to one knee in front of her, offering the bowl he'd prepared, a shy smile starting on his lips.

"Too late," Cindy snapped. "You took so long I'm not hungry anymore. Eat it yourself."

The boy reddened to the ears, his grin fading, and threw a confused look at Dorothy Mae.

"It's all right, Willis. Go ahead and eat it."

The boy carried the bowl to his corner, where he sat, staring at the bowl of cereal.

Etta lifted an eyebrow. "You do spoil him. No wonder the boy is so huge. Feeding him cream and bananas in the middle of the day, with supper not far off."

"I figure," Dorothy Mae said with a benevolent smile, "he has nothing else in his life and certainly no future. He might as well eat if it brings him a measure of happiness."

"Like I said before, you're a saint."

"Saint or no," Dorothy Mae said, "I'd best get this supper on the table. Big Harry can outgrowl a lion when he's hungry."

"I can growl too," Little Harry said, dropping to his knees. He crawled toward Wil-

lis making animal noises. Wil-lis edged away, bewildered.

"Big as that boy is, appears he's scared of your youngun. Look at him scoot under the table," Etta said, laughing.

"Little Harry can hold his own all-right," Dorothy agreed.

"Now I want to help with something," the older woman offered, reaching for an apron.

"Never you mind! Sit back down and be the grand lady to-day. Just keep me company. You're my best friend and I see you so seldom."

Dorothy didn't want the woman's help. She didn't want her chicken fried up greasy and she didn't want lumps in her cream gravy. She couldn't bear to see Big Harry digging any of Etta's straggly gray hairs out of the mashed potatoes. The woman didn't take any more pride in her cooking, from what Dorothy Mae had seen, than she did in her appearance.

Dorothy's hands worked without a break, in rhythm with her voice, and when she'd finished, she knew the dinner was perfect. Willis took his on a TV-snack tray. There wasn't enough room at the table even with the extra leaf in it.

"You can't get chicken like this in the supermarket," Etta said, leaving only shiny bones in her plate.

"Bet your choppers you

can't," Harry snorted. "They feed their chickens chemicals to make 'em grow fast. It changes the taste."

"I wish my Charlie hadn't been ailin' tonight," Etta said, pressing her napkin to her lips. "He does love his chicken."

"Why, big Harry." Dorothy Mae laid a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Run out and kill another hen for me to dress, so Etta can take it home and fix it for Charlie."

Harry shot her a murderous look. "Cold out there."

"Now I wasn't hinting," the older woman protested.

"Yes, daddy." Little Harry danced over to his father. "I want to kill another chicken."

Harry shook his head. "It's too cold, son. Tell you what. We'll kill one in a day or so and take it over to 'em."

"I'd want to pay, of course," Etta said.

"I want to do it now. I want to cut its head off now, Pa. I can do it alone. I'd dearly love to."

"It's too cold," his father repeated.

"I want to. I *want* to."

"Shut up!" Cindy snapped, giving her brother a push. "I dearly wish somebody would cut *your* head off. Then *you'd* know how it feels."

The boy aimed at her shin with the toe of his shoe, but she

grabbed at him and he ran off as fast as his feet would carry him.

"Little *creep!*" she yelled after him.

"I'd best be leaving before a blizzard starts up," Etta said, "thought I do hate to leave without helpin' clean up."

"Don't mind about that. Big Harry will drive you."

"I'll just get my coat then." The woman started toward the bedroom.

Dorothy Mae threw Harry a helpless glance. The children had been dreadful. Etta would forget the nice chicken and all the fixings when she took her gossip to her church meeting.

"Those children use words like 'skunk' and 'stink' right in front of company and you should hear how they fight

with each other," she pictured the woman saying.

What had Cindy said to little Harry at the last?

"I dearly wish somebody would cut your head off. I dearly wish—"

Dorothy Mae's eyes slid slowly, fearfully toward the corner where Willis had retreated after dinner. It was empty.

"I dearly wish . . ."

"Where's little Harry?" she shrieked.

"Outside. Why?" Cindy asked.

Dorothy Mae flew to the door. "Little Harry," she wailed. "Little Harry!"

But she saw only Willis, heading toward her from the shed, an axe in his hand and a slow grin on his face for Cindy.



The Killers of Santa Cruz

Throughout the early 1970's, this quiet California community lay at the mercy of a trio of psychotic killers who raped and slew a still uncounted list of victims with complete immunity.

by DAVID MAZROFF

IN THE EARLY 1970's three murderers, unknown to each other, were responsible for more than twenty victims whose bodies were scattered over the bleak, rocky terrain of the Santa Cruz Mountains in California. The area of their activity was shielded by dense forests of redwood, oak and other trees. Because of this heavy forest, search for the bodies of their victims was extremely difficult. The murderers counted on that. No *corpus delicti*—no evidence, no trial and no conviction.

Santa Cruz is a sleepy town. Situated on Monterey Bay, the mountains rise behind it to the east. The highest peak is called *Loma Prieta, the Hill of Dark-*

ness. It is aptly named. Here, the lunatic Charlie Manson came with his *family* of misanthropic broads and studs to set up living quarters for a short rest before they continued their journey toward a more permanent home in the west San Fernando Valley.

Had Manson met and persuaded the killers of Santa Cruz to join his group, the result would almost certainly have been far more catastrophic than were the hideous murders the *family* did commit.

Other nuts and misfits came to Santa Cruz to practice their religious rituals, sacrificing animals and humans in hope of appeasing an angry god.

A New TRUE CRIME Feature



Hoods of the Mafia also dragged hapless victims up the mountain and there tortured and killed them with a similar lack of compassion or mercy.

It took an enterprising investigative reporter by the name of Leonard Roy, Jr., to crash open this Pandora's Box of infamy, to reveal the vicious cults that shook up the entire state and much of the country. But not Santa Cruz itself—which was ironic.

The three local killers who wreaked the greatest havoc on human life were Herb Mullin, Emil "Bid Ed" Kemper, and John Linley Frazier. These three self-styled cultists had neither followers nor motives, apart from a Satanic urge to maim and kill with a zestful ingenuity that rivaled that of the worst of underworld hit-men.

Santa Cruz harbored a heterogenous population, its large elements of middle-aged men and women and senior citizens balanced by the 14,000 students, who attended the community college and a new campus of the University of California.

Both young and old alike took their sun on the wooden benches in one of the malls and on the beachfront at the Pacific Garden Mall. Outdoor coffee houses lay scattered in several

areas. There, everyone did his or her thing—dancing, singing, juggling, impressions, just about everything else within the range of human entertainment.

On the surface, the atmosphere was casual, offering an absorption sufficient to provide the community with a rich counterculture of the creative and performing arts. Some two dozen or more selling writers made their homes in Santa Cruz. The scholars, professors and instructors of both the community college and U. of C. formed informal cultural groups.

Murders? Oh, hell, and damn—there was just too much talk about murders. This seemed to be the consensus.

Reporter Leonard Roy, Jr., questioned Randall Kane, owner of the Catalyst, a restaurant and discotheque, a rock joint where the long haired boys and girls in their late teens and early twenties, made their official hangout. Grass, uppers and downers, some of the hard stuff, was in evidence everywhere. In the shadows, lurked the dope peddlers, hoods and gangsters.

Roy asked Kane about the Catalyst. "I'm told a great deal of soft and hard drugs is used in your place. Do you want to comment on that?"

"No, I don't want to comment on it. What do you think I do—go around and look into guys' pockets and girls' purses? Hey, man—hey, chick—you carrying grass or horse? I'd be out of business in two days. If there's any suspicion that drugs are carried by patrons in my place, then let the vice squad do the job. That's my position, Mister Roy," he snapped. "Do we understand each other?"

"Did you ever give any thought to the fact that the men who are doing the killings in this town, up in the mountains, may be among your patrons?"

"I don't know nothing about no murders," Kane retorted.

"When you had your place on Front Street," Roy said, "a man named John Linley Frazier, right name John Pasca, was a regular there."

"So what?"

"Sometime in October nineteen hundred seventy, firemen discovered five bodies at the bottom of the swimming pool on Dr. Victor Ohta's grounds. Five innocent people—Dr. Ohta's entire family. Each had been strangled with a silk scarf and thrown into the pool. You do recall that, don't you?"

"Mr. Roy," Kane demanded angrily, "just what the hell do you want from *me*? I'm a legitimate businessman and

run a legitimate business. What my customers do is their business—just so long as they don't do it in my place of business."

Roy regarded Kane seriously. His tone was quiet. "Mr. Kane, you asked what I want from you. *I* want nothing. But *you* should."

"Want what?"

"Awareness. This is your town. You're a good citizen. You should care about what happens to other people in your community. Good day, Mr. Kane."

Roy's investigations led him to Gordon Sinclair, editor of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, where he was received cordially. The *Sentinel* was the oldest newspaper in town, and had been reporting crime and the doings of townspeople since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Roy said, "Mr. Sinclair, no one in town seems anxious to talk about the murders. Why?"

"Well, call it civic pride. The locals, those who have lived here for years, would rather talk about the educational institutions, the opera house. It's as simple as that."

"Not quite. Some time ago, rangers discovered the bodies of four teenaged girls, campers, shot to death and left in a lean-to in the redwood forest. There were the murders of a

transient old Catholic priest and two young children."

"We covered those incidents." Sinclair was reflective for a moment, added, "With scare headlines."

"What I'm talking about, Mr. Sinclair, is how much pressure the community has put on your police department for a solution to these murders? Whoever is committing them—and there must be more than one person—is still around, probably a resident. Someone has to know something!"

The murders continued. A young woman named Karen Percifield was discovered in a park not far from the rural town of Aptos. Then two more young women, Vicki Bezore and Mary Gorman, disappeared. An abandoned car belonging to Mary Gorman was found in a creekbed. Both young women had been beaten to death. A blood-stained rock and claw hammer turned up in a clump of bushes nearby.

Mary Gorman's father accused the sheriff's department of ineptitude, inefficiency and intolerable laxity. He engaged his own police force, two detectives, a chemist and a lawyer.

The daily search for Gorman's daughter ended dramatically when two hikers discovered the nude bodies of Vickie Bezore and Mary Gorman

on August 11, 1976. The bodies lay in a dirty gulch a short distance from Highway Nine in the Santa Cruz mountains.

John Linley Frazier was a vicious psychopath. That was learned after he was captured. He had taken it upon himself to be a defender of the ecology and set out to "punish" those who despoiled it.

How did Vickie Bezore and Mary Gorman despoil the ecology? They had camped in the mountains, perhaps built a small fire of branches and twigs to keep warm.

Frazier's explanation was as erratic as his personality. His eyes were always afire with some lunatic gleam. His thin lips worked feverishly as he talked. His hands trembled. He was a man tortured by the idea that he had been chosen by some strange god to work as a disciple to protect nature's handiwork. Frazier was ugly physically, mentally, emotionally. He came from a broken home. Throughout his teens, he was a loner, an argumentative, stubborn, opinionated young man, who grew worse after he reached maturity.

Mary Gorman's father again attacked the sheriff's department for lack of effort to protect the residents of the town and for failure in the search for his daughter. He made stringent

demands on the city council to form a committee of protest and to oust the sheriff. He got nowhere.

The three killers, Frazier, Herbert William Mullin and Emil "Big Ed" Kemper, had something in common. They were mentally and emotionally disturbed. Why someone of the groups in which they were known didn't recognize it, suspect one or all of them for being involved in the murders is beyond comprehension—unless, of course one again goes back to the apathy syndrome, a refusal to get involved in a criminal trial or risk exposure to retaliation.

When Leonard Roy, Jr., was investigating the series of murders he found that Santa Cruz had changed considerably in the last decade. The young people, the college crowd, the long-haired group, wanderers with backpacks and guitars, hitchhikers, groupies, open and free sex philosophy believers, had taken over.

Wherever one of the groups gathered, there was music, rock and roll, dancing, ribald and cacophonous, a modern Babylon, a Sodom and Gomorrah. It was bizarre. In explanation, one of the townspeople declared, "A different, a new, strenuous life spirit has come into being in Santa Cruz. It is a testing

ground of new ways to live, creating a powerful kind of Karma.

If that were so, no one could define Big Ed's explanation after his capture when he told his interrogators, "Yes, I killed my mother." He committed this act of matricide the day before Easter, 1973, and declared, "What's good enough for my victims is certainly good enough for my mother."

A significant note on the "New Life Style" was contained on one of the bulletin boards on the Pacific Garden Mall. It read, "Working female, non-smoker, semi-vegetarian, meditating student, needs a space to share. I have lots of good energy to share and offer it."

She found it in an apartment occupied by two other young women and four men.

Santa Cruz has earned its reputation for this new life style. The health-fad addicts, the muscle-bound weight lifters, the surfers, the available and willing young women who flocked there during the summer months, making the scene. It was all there, far more so than that of "Muscle Beach" in Los Angeles.

THE INCREDIBLE ELEMENT in the public apathy toward the murders and their solution lay in

the fact that danger existed for everyone. No one could say for a certainty that he or she would not be the next victim. The young women especially should have felt concern, but apparently they didn't.

District Attorney Peter Chang was certain that the murders were being committed by the long-haired youth that had flocked into town. He ordered a roundup and subjected them to severe questioning. Most were released for lack of evidence. A few others were detained for further interrogation.

Those who were released banded together and, as a measure of expedience and self-defense, pledged themselves to learn who the actual killers were.

Then, vague fears dropped over the heads of their young women. Unharnessed breasts were corseted with tight bras, miniskirts dropped below the knees. Short shorts were replaced by Bermudas. The girls traveled in pairs or in groups of four and five for mutual protection.

Detectives of the Homicide Division began an intensive investigation of locals. It was a long and tedious task. Among those who came under scrutiny were John Linley Frazier, Herbert Mullin, and "Big Ed" Kemper, along with a half-

dozen others regarded as eccentric.

Frazier, detectives learned, grew up in Santa Cruz on a rabbit farm. He was a juvenile delinquent. Even as a teenager, he had exhibited signs of being a supercharged non-conformist, freakish to the nth degree.

Herbert Mullin had been an excellent student in high school and was voted *Most Likely To Succeed*—A truly ironic prediction. Early in his high school days he turned onto speed and acid, later onto Eastern mysticism. The induced fantasies to which he turned after he left high school were akin to being possessed by devils that no exorcist could excise.

He had become interred in a subterranean furnace that spewed violence and death. Mullin scattered particles of his insanity through the town, a surly loner, spitting invectives at young women, fighting the hippies, vandalizing cars and stores, knocking bags of groceries from shoppers' arms.

Kemper was confined in the Atascadero State Hospital in his teens. He was adjudged criminally insane. He had murdered his grandparents. Back in Santa Cruz, where he lived with his mother, this psychopath walked the streets of the town, visited the hangouts of the girls who were on

one or another of the narcotics, grass, speed, LSD, heroin, cocaine. They were at that time wearing revealing clothes with breasts exposed, and even portions of their sex organs.

Aroused, he made overtures to many of them, all of whom turned him down. There was something *too freakish* about him for their tastes.

Rejection can be a terrible wound. It is possible that his turndown was responsible for the murders he committed. Again, he already had demonstrated his murderous character. He didn't need too much of a reason.

Kemper, Frazier and Mullin were losers, social misfits, and should have been confined. However, there wasn't any evidence at this point to have effected their confinement legally in a state hospital. The law does not provide for confinement of any person who may be dangerous, not until he or she commits a criminal act to justify the confinement.

Leonard Roy, Jr., interviewed David Marlowe, a professor of psychology at the university. This was after the three men had been apprehended.

Marlowe said, "If the atmosphere had been different in Santa Cruz, these three men wouldn't have remained in town but gone on to other

areas. However, the climate in the city was such that it offered each what he sought, even Kemper, who eventually found a girl who was willing."

"Isn't it strange, Professor, that all three should have chosen to remain in Santa Cruz?"

"Not really. People in Santa Cruz don't give a damn about strange characters. There are so many of them around. They have come to be accepted as a part of the environment, like the mountains and the ocean. This is a place where you can step off the highway and be in the middle of a wilderness only a couple of minutes later. Every transient junkie and hippie had learned about this town and so they come here.

"Take Frazier—he was always spaced out. Nobody cared. Kemper? Well, this guy had it easy. Young women hitchhike. It's a national evil. They hitchhike to Fort Lauderdale during the Easter and Christmas vacations. You'll find them by the hundreds on the beaches there along AIA. Or in Tampa, or St. Pete, in the Gulf area. Or Orlando. Same here.

"Kemper had his victims tailor made. He simply coasted up and down the freeways and picked up hitchhikers. Girls, two, three, four. Rape and murder. All three, Frazier, Mullin, and Kemper, are monsters.

Kemper is the worst of all. Kemper cut his victims to pieces. Take it from there."

Leonard Roy, Jr., went back to the Catalyst. He was greeted by Randall Kane.

"I'm glad you came back. I've been thinking a great deal of what you said. Maybe I can help."

Roy nodded. "You'll be doing a public service. Maybe your help will trigger others to get off their backsides and cooperate."

Kane shrugged. "Could be. It may take another murder or two." He looked around the room, pointed to two young men. They were a couple of typical hippies, long-haired, wearing patched jeans and colorful shirts open to the waist. Both had strings of beads around their necks that hung to their breastbones. With regular haircuts, clean clothes, and a bath they could have passed for college freshman.

Kane said, "The one on the right is Pete. The other one is Bob. You can use my office. I'll bring them in."

The two young men came into Kane's office a few minutes later. They regarded Roy suspiciously. Roy regarded them with a non-committal expression and studied them appraisingly. He was a little taken aback by what he saw. They

were clean-cut and obviously had definite traces of good breeding.

Roy said, "Will you sit down, please." They took chairs. "My name is Leonard Roy. I'm an investigative reporter. I'm interested in learning who the killers are that have ravaged this town, and in supporting the police in bringing them to justice."

"Yeah, man," Pete said. "So are we. The fuzz picked us up, and a lot of our buddies and put us through the wringer. We'd like to see these cats put away so the fuzz would get off our backs. They still think our group, one of us, or two of us, are involved."

Roy nodded. "Yes, I can understand that. Mr. Kane told me you have some information about someone you suspect?"

Bob said, "There's this cat Frazier. Man, he's always strung out like the week's wash, and he talks a lot, brags, you know, about how he did this caper or that one, and he wasted five people at one time."

Roy pricked up his ears. "Five people?"

"Five—yeah. That's what he said."

"Did he mention the name Ohta. *Dr. Ohta*?"

"Yeah," Bob said. "That's the name—Ohta. He tied up all the people with silk scarves.

Strangled them and threw them into the pool. Man, this cat is really freaked."

"Look," Roy pointed out, "this may be the first break in the series of murders. Will you two come with me to the D.A.'s office and tell him what you told me?"

The two men exchanged glances. There was doubt in their eyes.

"We don't know, Man," Bob said. "That's pretty funky. We don't like being finks."

"Do you like being picked up by the fuzz, and subjected to interrogation, kept in dirty jail cells? Do you like that better?"

"No, we *don't!*" Pete exclaimed. "Who does?" Anyway, the fuzz already have had us and we proved we knew nothing."

"Okay, I'll go along with that. But as long as you and your pals remain in town you will always be under suspicion. I'm not sure the police aren't checking on your group all the time.

"You know the Charlie Manson family was picked up on suspicion, released and then arrested again when further investigation proved they were involved and subsequently convicted. Why don't you two do yourself and your friends a favor and tell your story to the D.A.?"

Both thought it over for several minutes, then Bob said, "I think we should do it." Pete nodded agreement.

In the office of District Attorney Peter Chang, Bob, Pete, and Roy were directed to seats. Chang said, "I'll get a stenographer and detectives from the Homicide Division. Just be patient. It will only be a few minutes, gentlemen."

District Attorney Chang introduced the two detectives and the stenographer—David Patterson, "Smooth" Wilson and Miss Peggy Harris, a comely brunette.

Miss Harris took down Bob and Pete's statements. D.A. Chang turned to Detective Sergeant Patterson.

"I'll get you a warrant. Pick that nut up. *Now!*"

Chang thanked Bob and Pete, shook hands with them. To Leonard Roy, he said, "I want to commend you for your interest and the way you have worked in trying to help us solve this epidemic of homicides. You can expect every cooperation from this office. Any time."

John Linley Frazier, right name John Pascal, was arrested in the next hour, brought to the Homicide Division where he was interrogated by Chang, Patterson and Wilson. He was booked at once on an open

charge of murder on five counts.

In the days of the big studios, before World War II, beautiful young women from all over the country came to Hollywood by train and bus, by car or hitch-hiked, filled with hopes that they would be discovered and become movie stars. They wound up mostly working in restaurants as waitresses, in bars as barmaids or hostesses, as mistresses or as call girls or street-walkers.

No one could tell them their chances of becoming stars in the motion picture industry were about one in a hundred million. The postwar years brought a drastic change in morality, a carryover from the war years when husbands and boyfriends were overseas and women felt the need of immediate affection and love.

A substitute? Yes. But substitutes have a way of becoming lasting alliances over protracted periods of intimate association. *Dear John* letters were sent by the thousands to men overseas.

The new morality, new sexual freedom, gave women a voice in the now socially accepted standards that prevailed. The single standard had come to life with a kind of wild abandon reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties.

The murderous trio were not among the hippies who came by Greyhound bus from San Francisco.

The townspeople used to watch the Front Street bus station with curiosity as it emptied its passengers and shook their heads in dismay at the disembarking hippies. Bearded young men wearing dirty jeans, and young women wearing jeans and tops that exposed young breasts. They drank beer from cans on the streets and threw the empties in the gutters.

In 1955, the San Lorenzo River flood inundated the small business district of downtown Santa Cruz. When the silt was cleared away, and the streets cleaned up, the landowners and homeowners looked the town over and saw to their consternation that the area had become a Social Security retirement ghetto, as well as a seasonal resort for bikers and beach bums.

For some reason no one could explain, the Suntan Special stopped running a year later. The City Council met. The consensus was that something drastic had to be done to forestall a complete downgrading of the town with subsequent reduction of property values sure to follow.

The Chamber contacted the

Wrigley company and induced them to make their Juicy Fruit gum there. They then voted in a Community Redevelopment Project. A government building went up, along with a motel row, on Ocean Street. The military was persuaded to dredge a yacht harbor near Twin Lakes Beach.

Still, the hippies, beach bums, bikers and high school and college dropouts came in droves, diminishing whatever glory the resident citizens worked to restore to the town that had prided itself on its beauty and pastoral charm.

THE IRONY OF IT

THE IRONY OF IT was that, in the wake of this tireless work by the citizens group who hoped to create a stabilized town, the ritualistic murders began. Instead of pursuing a vigorous approach toward solving the first of the killings, the mental climate was to ignore them. Hell, there were mass murders in every city.

There was random terror that struck the town with news of the carnage among the redwoods. But it was only a momentary reaction and died within a week. In 1976, on a hot day in June, the body of Karen Percifield was discovered by a group of volleyball players

near the rural community of Aptos. The D.A. was moved to declare hotly, "*Santa Cruz is the murder capital of the world!*" That didn't solve the Karen Percifield murder.

About two hundred years before, a group of Spanish soldiers and Franciscan fathers came to the site of what was to become the town of Santa Cruz, near the area of the northern curve of Monterey Bay. The *Mission La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz* was constructed in honor of the holy cross on which Christ was martyred.

This title may have foretold the bloody execution of innocents, perpetrated by the acid head, Herb Mullin, or of the six young women who made the tragic mistake of allowing themselves to be picked up by "Big Ed" Kemper and were slaughtered after two of them were raped. Kemper also killed two older women. Also John Pascal, alias John Linley Frazier, the maniac who wiped out an entire family in cold blood.

Investigative reporter Leonard Roy kept on doggedly searching for the other murderers. He didn't know who they were or how many of them there were. He hadn't yet come across any evidence on Mullin and Kemper but he was picking up snatches of information here

and there as he kept moving from place to place where the hippies, Yoga disciples, and rock 'n rollers, hung out.

Roy discarded the talk that the murders may have been committed by field workers and cannery employees who worked the area seasonally. He was convinced that he was looking for locals, residents of the town. The reporter went back to the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* and asked Editor Gordon Sinclair for permission to go through back issues of the paper that covered the murders.

Roy studied painstakingly the modus operandi used in each of the murders. He talked again with Randall Kane at the Catalyst, with District Attorney Peter Chang, with detectives of the Homicide Division. He talked with Max Rafferty, superintendent of schools, who once referred to the university campus as a cross "between a hippie pad and a brothel."

Out of all this conversation two names kept cropping up—Temper and Mullin. Leonard Roy concentrated his efforts on these two.

Herb Mullin, who had turned to speed, acid and Eastern mysticism drew Roy's attention first. He did the Baretta bit, passing as a hippie. Roy found Mullin in the Catalyst.

He hesitated as he looked

Mullin over through narrowed eyes, said, "You a fuzz?"

"Fuzz?" Mullin exploded. "No, I ain't no fuzz. Man, you must be strung out."

Roy turned to a young man standing on the other side of him. He looked well-dressed, very polite. The reporter said, "What's your name?"

"Ray Bigwood."

"You live in town?"

"No. I'm from Freeport, Illinois."

"Freeport, Illinois? You're putting me on. There's no such place."

"I don't care," Mullin put in. "Why don't you blow it, Man! I think you're strung out."

Ray Bigwood said, "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen . . ." He turned from Roy and Mullin and walked to another position at the bar.

Roy felt he had set Mullin up enough to push him. He touched Mullin's arm. "You know what, Man, huh? You know what?"

Mullin mimicked him. "You know what, Man? Yeah, I know what!"

Roy said, "You're up tight. How come you're up tight, huh?"

Mullin pounded the top of the bar with a fist. "I'm not up tight, and you're still strung out."

"If I am strung out I've got a

reason. I been on edge for a long time." He leaned close to Mullin. "I shot four kids, campers, a couple of years back and it's been on my mind."

Mullin said, "You're a lousy liar."

"No, no. It's true. I did it." Roy grabbed Mullin's arms. "I did it."

Mullin jerked his arms away. "You're a liar, an acid head. You ain't got the guts to waste anybody, not four at one time."

"You have, huh?"

"Yeah, I have. I know you're lying because—" he looked around furtively, lowered his voice, jabbed a forefinger in Roy's chest—"because, you lousy acid head, I wasted them. Yeah, and a lot more."

It had happened. The tumblers fell into place. But Mullin's admission wasn't enough though. It would never hold up in court. He could deny he ever said anything. Roy made a desperate move.

"You're the one who's lying!" he said. "You wait here and I'll prove it to you."

"Don't hold your breath." Mullin turned away.

Roy was back in a half-hour, out of breath. Strapped to his body were a powerful miniature tape recorder and a button mike. Roy spotted Mullin at the end of the room and let out a sigh of relief. He moved to

where Mullin sat at a corner table, alone. Roy pulled a chair over close to him.

Mullin sneered. "Okay, acid-head, show me your proof."

Roy yanked a small .22-caliber pistol from a pocket of his coat. "This is my proof," he said triumphantly. "I did it with this."

"You're nuts, Man. That this is a twenty-two. The four were killed with a thirty-eight. You want to know why I did it, Man? I'll tell you." His ego had surpassed his good sense, or whatever was left of it. "I did it to satisfy God, a sacrificial ritual, to stop an earthquake along the San Andreas Fault. It worked, too."

"No way, Man," Roy countered. "I did it. With this gun. It was me. Not you. I know your trips. LSD. So don't call me an acid head. You're the one." He continued to taunt Mullin until Mullin broke and all semblance of rationality vanished.

"You lousy liar!" Mullin growled. "I got the gun I did it with. And I wasted that Catholic priest and a couple of kids."

"You ain't got no gun," Roy said. "You just like to brag."

"I'll show you, you acid-head!" He got up and hurried out.

Roy went to Randall Kane's

office, knocked on the door. He went in to Kane's response. "I have to use your phone. I've got Mullin."

"Go ahead."

Roy phoned District Attorney Chang. "I've got him. He ran out of here to show me the gun he used in the killings."

"Great! I'll have Patterson and Wilson there to pick him up.—Be careful. That guy is more dangerous than a roused rattlesnake."

"I'll be on my toes."

Roy returned to the table and waited. The minutes dragged by. Detectives Patterson and Wilson came into the Catalyst, saw Roy, nodded, asked a silent question. Roy shook his head. Ten more minutes passed.

Then Mullin stormed through the door and forced his way to the table where Roy sat. He leaned toward Roy, his mouth working nervously, his eyes burning with hate.

He said, "Man, in my pocket here," he patted the righthand side of his coat, "in my pocket is that thirty-eight. You know what? I'm going to kill you, right here. Right now! You set me up. You ain't no acid head. You ain't no fuzz either. I don't know what the hell you are but I'm going to waste you."

His right hand moved to the pocket of his coat where the gun lay. It didn't quite get

there. With a sudden movement of both hands, Roy shoved the table hard against Mullin. As Mullin fell to the floor, the table on top of him, Patterson and Wilson grabbed him, yanked him to his feet, pinned his hands behind him and slipped on the cuffs.

Mullin let loose a string of epithets at Roy. "I'll get you for this if it's the last thing I ever do."

"You'll be too old to pull a trigger, Mullin," Patterson snapped. "Okay, let's go."

The customers made way for the trio as Patterson and Wilson hustled Mullin out the door. Roy got up from his chair and went to the bar.

"A double Canadian Club, straight," he told the bartender.

"Sure thing. On the house. Mr. Kane's compliments."

Roy downed the liquor, set the glass down. "Fill it up. I'll drink this one to Mr. Kane's compliments." He heaved a sigh.

On the way to his hotel he picked up a bottle of Canadian Club. In his room, he dialed his paper, reached the city editor.

"Marty? Great. Just great! No, I don't want to file the story yet. We've got two down and one to go. When I wrap up the third one, you're going to get one hell of a story. I nailed the big one today. Herbert Mul-

lin. Killed a dozen assorted victims. The tally is a baker's dozen. That's right. Thirteen.

"The last one on the hit parade is a guy named Emil "Big Ed" Kemper. A psycho, and killed his mother, and before that his grandparents. I don't know how but I'm going to give it the old college try. The way I look at it now, the ball is on the five-yard line, first down, goal to go. Yeah, sure, Marty.

"No, I'm going to take a hot shower, drink half a bottle of booze, take a nap and then have dinner. Tomorrow, I'm going after Big Ed. Thanks. I'll need it."

Included in the murders by Kemper were two young women he picked up a short distance from the University of California campus. He took them into the woods, raped them, kissed them good-bye, then killed them.

The arrests of Frazier and Mullin had made Kemper wary. He nosed around the town and learned that Leonard Roy, Jr., was the man behind the arrests of Mullin and Frazier. He turned hunter. He decided to kill the journalist with his bare hands.

Roy misjudged Kemper. He placed him in the same category with Frazier and Mullin.

Leonard Roy, Jr., had turned

to investigative reporting several years before when he uncovered a corrupt administration in one of the major cities of Arizona. When he was on the verge of exposing the whole dirty business two men came to his hotel and offered him a bribe of fifty thousand dollars to "forget the whole thing." He refused.

Roy was an exceptionally dedicated reporter and to abdicate his journalistic responsibility for money was unthinkable to him. Before he left Phoenix he was attacked on a dark street but fought off the two men. He was in the prime of his life, strong, capable of handling himself, holder of a black belt in karate.

The danger to his life, lurked in the dark forest of Kemper's mind. He was plotting to attack Roy in an isolated part of town, to catch him unaware.

CAT AND MOUSE

THE CAT AND MOUSE PLAY began in deadly earnest as each man sought the other. Both were patient. Both moved carefully toward the end result of their purpose.

Roy frequented the Catalyst, dressed in jeans and a denim shirt. He talked with the young people, the hippies, junkies, college students. He returned to

his hotel in mid-afternoon on the third day of his hunt for Kemper and found his room in a shambles. It had been thoroughly ransacked. Toilet articles had been tossed into the bathtub, bottles broken, papers torn up.

Roy surveyed the wreckage and told himself that his quarry knew who he was and why he was in town. He would have to be careful. Kemper was a big, powerful man. That much he knew. Roy knew also that the games he had played to trap Frazier and Mullin wouldn't work against Kemper.

The reporter decided that if Kemper could ransack his room, then he would allow himself the same privilege. Breaking into Kemper's room or apartment would constitute an illegal act. He couldn't afford that.

Roy decided to consult D.A. Chang. Meanwhile, he was going to have a talk with the desk clerk to determine how Kemper got into the room to accomplish his vandalism.

The room clerk was a middle-aged man named John Francis Reed. He was a talkative character who couldn't answer a direct question with a simple response. Reed knew nothing helpful.

In District Attorney Chang's office, Roy related what had

happened. He asked about a search warrant for Kemper's room or apartment.

"How can you be sure it was Kemper who ransacked your room?"

"Vibes, Mr. Chang. I get that gut feeling about certain things. I'm sure it was Kemper."

"We'll have to tell the judge something. Probable cause. What are we looking for—evidence covering a particular crime? What crime?"

Roy thought a moment. "I'm missing a valuable transistor radio. I think I saw a man answering Kemper's description leaving the hotel with the radio in his hands. That's probable cause, isn't it? Not only that, but I think if you sent your lab men over to the hotel they will find Kemper's fingerprints all over the place. Good enough?"

Chang nodded.

"Let's do it then."

Chang said, "We'll send a man over from the Burglary Detail to make out a report establishing the crime, and then we'll talk to a judge. I'll tell you this much, Mr. Roy, the judges in this town are touchy about search warrants on the kind of information you're giving me. I assume you did see this man, right?"

"You presume correctly, Mr. Chang."

Chang grinned broadly. "I said *assumed*, Mr. Roy."

"I heard you." The two men studied each other in silence for a minute. "I'll want to go along," Roy said.

Chang was thoughtful. "As an observer? A reporter? I guess that'll be okay."

A judge issued the warrant. Kemper lived in a rooming house in a quiet neighborhood off Main Street. The detectives went through the room. In a corner of a drawer, wrapped in several pieces of kleenex, Roy found a pair of gold earrings and a gold-plated bracelet. He held them up to the two detectives.

"Sure as hell, this guy doesn't wear earrings and a woman's bracelet. These could be important," Roy declared.

"We'll take them," one of the detectives said.

They found nothing else. The three men returned to Chang's office and handed over the earrings and bracelet.

Chang said, "Could be something, or nothing. If these items belonged to any of the victims, Kemper could say he found them. The burden of proof is on us. Unfortunately, that's the law. But, let's see. Maybe we can squeeze him a little, or, maybe"—he turned to Roy—"you could add something to this."

"I'll work on it." Roy told the official.

"You do that. On your own. Independently. Understand?"

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Chang. But I'd like that pair of earrings and bracelet."

Chang handed them over. "They could be evidence. Take precautions."

Roy went to the homes of the parents of the girls who were killed, showed the earrings and bracelet. The earrings were identified by the parents of one of the girls, the bracelet by the parents of the other. Roy told them the police wanted the articles as evidence against the killer.

"Do they know who did it," the mother of one of the girls asked.

"They think so."

"Will they catch him?"

"I hope so. We're working on it, diligently."

"Are you a detective?"

"No. I'm an investigative reporter."

"Oh, we've heard of you. The whole town is talking about you." She touched his arm. "We're grateful to you for what you've done."

"Thank you. I imagine the district attorney and the Homicide detectives will want to take statements from you on the identification of the bracelet."

"We'll do everything they ask."

Roy returned to his hotel to see what had been done about tidying up his room. There was a telephone message for him. The clerk handed it to him. It read:

You want to meet me? 11:00 o'clock. A block east of the Catalyst. It was signed with the initial *K*.

"When did this message come in?" Roy asked the room clerk.

"I took it over the telephone, yes, sir, about an hour ago."

Roy nodded wordlessly and walked out. He went straight to see District Attorney Chang, handed him the note. Chang studied it.

"He's setting you up. Unless we get him on an attempted murder all we could charge him with is possession and put him away for a couple of years. That's not what we want."

"What's the answer?" Roy asked.

"You'll have to expose yourself. Are you up to it?"

Roy nodded. "I owe that bum something, among other things. He busted my typewriter and tore up a lot of important papers."

"Okay. I'll put some of our best men on this. By the way, how did you make out with the earrings and bracelet?"

"Positive identification by

both parents of the girls. There's no doubt in my mind of the fact that Kemper killed them."

"We think so, too. But this is a psycho. You keep the appointment. Don't look for us. You won't see us but we'll be there."

ELEVEN O'CLOCK JUMP

A LITTLE BEFORE eleven o'clock that evening, Roy walked from his hotel toward the Catalyst. The night was dark. He stood in front of the Catalyst and surveyed the area. His stomach was full of knots and beatles were crawling over them. It was the first time in his life that he had faced the danger of imminent death.

As he walked he had the curious feeling that he was in the presence of something bitterly evil. A sound of movement across the street drew him up straight and he crouched low in order to reduce the target he presented. He let out a sigh of relief as he saw a dog run from between two houses and go sniffing down the street.

A shot shattered the stillness of the night. Roy dropped and lay prone.

Another shot rang out. Then came a series of answering shots, punctuated by the sound of a man running. Lights went

on in windows on both sides of the street.

A figure ran to where Roy lay on the ground. It was Detective Sergeant Patterson. "You okay?"

Roy kose from the ground. He was shaken. "Yeah." He tested his arms and legs. "That bastard must be a bad shot. I was a wide open target."

"It's pretty dark. He may have been aiming at a shadow," Patterson said. "We've got the block surrounded. I don't think he can get away."

"I hope not."

Detectives moved throughout the area. The search went on for two hours. There was no sign of Kemper nor was there a sign of the rifle he had used.

"We'll cover the area some more," Patterson said.

Floodlights dissolved the darkness. The harsh white light probed the caverns that separated the houses, moved from house to house, up and down the street as detectives roamed the square block in search of Kemper.

Roy felt frustrated and impatient. He didn't want to go through another night like this one. It was almost four o'clock in the morning when the search for Kemper was abandoned.

"Let's try his apartment," Roy suggested.

Patterson was dubious but

agreed. Five detectives along with Roy drove to Kemper's rooming house. They surrounded the building. Kemper was not there.

"Well," Patterson said, "might as well call it a day and see what that nut will do next. I imagine we all could use some sleep. We'll drive you back to your hotel, Roy."

The night clerk was asleep behind the desk. Roy went up to his room. He started to insert the key in the lock but noticed the door was slightly ajar. Roy hesitated a moment, then kicked the door open and leaped into the room, diving to the floor and rolling over as a shot rang out over his head and the bullet embedded itself in the wall.

Roy was up instantly and leaped toward Kemper, kicking out viciously, and struck his enemy in the groin. The rifle fell to the floor and Roy snatched it up. All the hatred he felt for Kemper, welled up inside him.

He swung the butt of the rifle to the killer's jaw. There was a sound of splintered bone, and blood gushed from Kemper's mouth. He dropped to the floor in an unconscious heap.

Roy stared at his unconscious form, then called police headquarters.

"Will you send some men

over to take this bastard in?" Roy asked.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Roy. Sergeant Patterson left instructions to be notified if you called. I'll call him immediately."

When Sergeant Patterson arrived with three other detectives, Kemper was still unconscious.

Patterson grinned. "What did you hit him with?"

"The bastard tried to kill me. He was hiding in the room. That clerk was sound asleep. That's how he was able to get in."

"I think we've got it wrapped up," Patterson said. "After we dropped you off, we went back to his place and searched it

again. In the clothes closet, under a makeshift trapdoor, in a steel box, we found evidence that will put this creep away for a long time."

He touched Roy's arm. "Well, you really did it. You did a job that four years of work on our part couldn't accomplish."

The other officers took the unconscious Kemper out of the room.

Patterson said, "I suppose you'll be moving on now. Before you go, Mr. Chang would like to talk with you."

"Sure. After I get some sleep."

"You've earned it." He extended his hand and Roy shook it warmly.

Some of Next Month's Headliners

FLANAGAN FADED by CARL HOFFMAN

A New Suspenseful Short Novel

●

DEADHEAD COMING DOWN by MARGARET MARON

THE BLACK LEATHER CAP by HAL ELLSON

The Claimer Clamor

by R. G. HALLAWELL

Jack Wells was aware that fat men are not often jolly. But when Sarkanian walked in on him on a skip-trace assignment, Wells decided to kiss the Jolly Green Giant good-bye.



THE EVANS MITCHEL PEOPLE gave me a desk interviewers' spot with their Atlanta agency as soon as I was released from the hospital. I wanted a field operator's job but in a tender loving way Evans Mitchell made it clear that aluminum knee-caps were no longer in vogue.

I lasted less than two weeks in Atlanta. By that time I had duly memorized the EM motto, the EM dress code and the EM 'No-No's'. One morning I cocked my feet on the desk, broke open a *Racing Form* and set a fifth of J&B where it would be handy. I was wearing green socks with red slacks at the time.

I was immediately fired for violating every Evans Mitchell standard known to mankind. Since these transgressions occurred all in one sequence, I feel positive that it is a record that will stand up under pressure—

or until Billy Carter joins the EM agency.

I soon began meeting old friends in the unemployment line. It seems that private investigators and burlesque queens are an endangered species—particularly those with kneecaps remodeled by .38 slugs. Fortunately, in my profession, we usually performed with our pants on.

In a fleeting effort at self respect and a loan from my ex-mother-in-law, I moved back to home territory and opened my own office. But after three months, clients were not exactly walking through the *Yellow Pages* to find me.

Last Monday morning I was up to my neck in work. I couldn't decide whether to bet April Dawn in the third at Oaklawn or Gas City in the last race at Gulfstream. Gas City was an old claiming horse that Larry Frogde had picked up at Latonia. Larry and I had become buddies when he married my ex-wife, thus saving me a bucket of alimony. Personally, I feel he should have stuck to horses.

April Dawn was a two-year-old maiden, but was getting in with only a hundred four pounds because of the apprentice rider. I liked her chances and Frogde had the reputation of a smart trainer. But then

again, anybody dumb enough to marry Sheila might be capable of other mistakes. I decided to call my bookie and check the odds.

My finger had traced a path through two dial digits when an inflated version of TV's Cannon walked through my open door. But barely.

"You Jack Wells?"

Despite the rumors, I have found that fat people are not jolly. With this guy's scowl, he would never get to play the part of the Green Giant in a TV commercial.

"The one and only," I told him and nodded for him to take a chair. I hoped one would be enough. He was about my height but outweighed a Volkswagon. When we shook hands I got the impression that I had squeezed a pound of wet liver-wurst. His nearly-bald dome glistened with dampness and the mini-moustache had dripped-dry ends. He was hauling too much beef around.

"I need a little help, Jack. Got a bail jumper we think came to your fair city. Had a tip he was here, anyhow."

Now that Goliath was seated and directly opposite the desk, I discovered that he had one milky eye. I tried looking at the good one only, but that seemed unnatural. Finally I decided to stare at the bridge of his nose.

He tossed a brown manila envelope on the desk.

"His picture and I.D. marks are all in there. I can tell you that he'll be in the worst part of town, probably working as a dishwasher, fry-cook or saloon jockey. He's a dumb-ass, so you won't find him at Merrill, Lynch if you know what I mean," Fatso added.

"What's your line of work?" I asked him.

"Oh yeah—forgot about that. Here's my card, Jack."

His fat palm slapped a card down on my desk. It was wet like everything else. I wiped it on my pants leg before trying to read it. Between the smudges it said he was Arthur Sarkanian, Investigator, 101 Parker Place, Atlanta, Georgia. I had never heard of him, but then I wasn't in Atlanta too long.

"You working for a bail bonding outfit?" I asked Sarkanian.

"Sure am."

"What's your price if I happen to locate this guy?"

"Fifty now and three hundred more when you find him. Just tell me where he hangs out. Easiest money you'll ever make, Jack." He gave me a shark's grin with gold-capped incisors.

I decided I did not like Arthur Sarkanian for at least two reasons. He was trying to con

me and he was giving the office the aroma of a cheap Mexican whorehouse. Sarkanian's armpits needed spraying with Lestoil.

But I was two payments behind on my Mustang. In thirty days, Keller would have me bringing in my own car—which could prove to be another employment record for the *Book of Guinness*.

"Fifty bucks doesn't buy much information. I'll have to ask around some," I told him.

Sarkanian just grinned with his huge jaws. "Take it or leave it, Jack."

I should have left it but poverty is the mother of greed. So I violated one of my rules and accepted Sarkanians' fifty dollars, agreeing to another meeting in forty-eight hours.

With Sarkanian gone, I lysol-sprayed the office and dialed the Atlanta area code. A sugar-voiced operator informed me that Arthur Sarkanian had neither a listed nor unlisted telephone.

Whoever heard of a private investigator without a phone? I called and talked to four different bail bondsmen in the Atlanta area. None had heard of an Arthur Sarkanian. Curious, I opened the brown envelope.

The photo was full-faced but the subject had blinked with the flash. He was described as

five-eight, one hundred forty pounds, light hair and pale complexion. Age forty-six, tattooed letters *h-a-r-d* across the back of the left hand, *t-i-m-e* on the other hand. It added up to the I.D. of an ex-con, but if he had a name it wasn't included in my information.

My best chance would be through Deke Laughlin. The Irishman picked up a lot of stray gossip from the derelicts who inhabited Preston street. I phoned and Deke promised to put his ear to the bar-talk.

I tossed a mental coin and decided to phone police Captain Ellis Higgs. In my business, malpractice with the likes of Sarkanian was risking my PI license now that I knew he was using a phoney business card.

Ellis Higgs is a five-four gnome with the worst temper west of Anywhere. It's widely rumored that he once became mad while watching a Laurel and Hardy film. During his tantrums Higgs' upper denture will drop slightly, giving him his 'behind the back' at Headquarters nickname "Charlie Chan."

I caught Higgs at a good time. He only cursed twice and advised me to play out the string with Sarkanian, but to keep him informed at all times. Even the receiver slamming in my ear sounded especially gen-

tle. Higgs was in a playful mood.

The next afternoon I repossessed a black Mercury for Keller Finance and squandered my paycheck on a bottle of scotch and a red-headed cocktail waitress. That evening I got a call from Deke. I had to hold the phone a foot from my head and upset my glass of tomato juice in the process.

"Jack my boy, you don't sound like yourself."

"I'm not myself, Deke. I'm William Powell and I just got drunk with Myrna Loy," I told him.

"He's dead."

"You're telling me. What have you got?"

"I'm thinkin' your man is working for Katie French at her thievin' dump on Atchinson Street. Though I'd not be knowin' why even a scalawag would work for the likes of her," Deke drawled out in his best brogue.

"Thanks Deke. I owe you one," I told him and reached for the tomato-juice glass on the floor. My head needed a cold shower.

Katie's was a two-pooltable, one-bar hangout located midway in a block that could only be described as desperate. Garbage, broken glass, cans and paper littered the sidewalk and street. I fitted into the atmo-

sphere and ordered me a beer.

Two social security-ites wearing baseball caps were playing nine-ball. The hanging bulb illuminating the tables' green felt was the joints' sole bright spot. I caught the ancient aroma of grease, sweat and beer. The glass container on the oak bar held sausages floating in brine and whatever else might have fallen inside. I wouldn't have eaten one for Ali's next fight purse.

"Anybody in the back who could fry me a hamburger?" I asked the pot-bellied, dirty-aproned broad who stood leaning against the cash register. She was old but husky enough to have been a bouncer for the Senior Citizens' club.

"Yeah. Fry one burger, Whitey!" she yelled, turning her head toward the back of the place.

I swallowed part of my beer and wandered past the pool jacks toward the restroom, making sure that I got the wrong door. It opened into America's worst kitchen. A thousand cigarette butts littered the floor except where the mousetraps were set. Old calenders and greasy pans hung on the nail-driven walls. The one sink might have been scrubbed about the time of FDR's first fireside chat. I took one long look at the cook and muttered

something about the wrong door. It had been the right one however—"Whitey" was Sarkanian's supposed bailjumper. I retraced my steps, paid for the beer and hamburger-to-come and walked back out into the oxygen.

Sarkanian heaved his bulk through my doorway at ten the next morning. I had just finished checking the race results, finding that April Dawn ran third. Gas City had been scratched but was entered in today's sixth at Gulfstream, picking up an additional seven pounds from the track handicapper. It was the type situation that flashed a green light to any veteran horseplayer. It meant that Larry Frogge's old claimer was ready to run, and that he believed this was the right race regardless of the added weight. I thought I had a winner.

"Okay Jack, whatcha' got for me?" Sarkanian asked and interrupted my entertainment.

"Your man is working a fry-cook job in one of our terrific neighborhoods. It ought to be torn down so they could build slums, it's so bad," I told him.

"You're sure it's him?"

"Just as certain as I am that your cock-and-bull story is for the birds. What do you really want this guy for?" I asked Sarkanian.

He didn't like it. I got a long stare from the milky eye before he turned his head ever so slightly.

"Come on in here, Beanie," Sarkanian commanded to the door.

"Beanie" wore a brown corduroy cap with a black corduroy coat. Poor taste, but he could get away with it. I made him to be around six-four even with his slight stoop. Whiskey veins stood out on his flat-nosed face. He was big, tough looking and down at the heels. Gray hair stood out in tufts from around the brown cap. Beanie was getting older and possibly meaner.

The only way I wanted to tangle with this guy was with a choice of weapons. Chocolate-cream pies at twenty feet. But my memory-bank kept telling me that I had seen Beanie before today's meeting. It came to me then.

"I've got a real good horse today, Beanie," I told him. He gave me a vacant stare and took another draw on his cigaret. I went right on with the talking. "His name is Gas City and he goes in the sixth at Gulfstream. Scratched yesterday, picks up seven more pounds today and his trainer re-enters him."

"I'd rather bet an old claimer than a stakes hoss any day of

the week," Beanie responded in a hoarse-whispered voice.

Those were my sentiments exactly, so Beanie and I had the same track philosophy, but I had the feeling that "brothers" or not, Beanie would unscrew my head if he had to.

"Cut the crap," Sarkanian ordered.

"Okay, I'm impressed with all the muscle but, let's make a deal. I get uncomfortable with three in a car. You send Beanie out for a beer or two and I'll drive you to where the guy works. If it's him, you owe me the three bills," I told Sarkanian. "Otherwise it's no deal and I've got a .38 Special that says it isn't."

Fatso, gave me the milky eye treatment again. I realized that I had an obligation to call Ellis Higgs at headquarters, but the irritable little jerk would have to wait. Besides, I had the beginning of an idea. It was one of my Jack Wells' super-plans.

Sarkanian walked Beanie through the doorway and spoke in low tones outside. When he returned he was ready to travel, but I insisted that we give Beanie plenty of time to leave the premises.

I mentioned the weather a couple of times on the way to Atchinson Street, but Sarkanian only grunted something unintelligible. We parked 200

feet away in the back alley behind Katie's. I pointed to the back door and told him what to look for. The Mustang's shocks groaned back in place once Sarkanian was on solid ground.

I watched him walk ponderously to the old building and enter the kitchen. Twenty seconds later, I heard three shots.

Before I could get my tin leg out of the Mustang's door, a light blue sedan shot by me and screech-braked to a halt at Katie's rear entrance. With surprising agility, Sarkanian popped out of the bar-kitchen and into the sedan. As it catapulted out of the alley, I saw that Beanie was the driver.

Whitey lay crumpled on the dirty kitchen floor now rapidly becoming red. He was no paler in death than in his so-called life, but his *hard-time* had come to an end. The rest of the place was deserted although two cigarettes still smouldered on one of the pool tables. Evidently Katie's clientele would risk ptomaine but drew the line at gun-shot poisoning.

I called Higgs and waited for the police and coroner. I also phoned Ernie Verdugo.

"Ernie, it's Jack Wells. Did a big, rough-looking character wearing a brown cap place a bet with you? Maybe forty minutes ago?" I asked him.

"Yeah, he sure did—a C-note

on Gas City at Gulfstream."

"Great! That's terrific, Ernie!"

"I dunno about that, but at sixteen to one if that nag wins, I'm gonna need a couple of aspirins," Ernie joked.

"Never mind," I told him. "Look, when this guy comes in to collect, I want you to stall him. Count his money four times, drop it on the floor, anything you can think of. You got that Ernie? I mean really stall him!"

The bookie went into a tirade about how his customers expected prompt payment, honor among thieves and all that junk. If it was supposed to bring tears to my eyes, it failed. I tried a new approach.

"Look Ernie, you do me a favor; I do you a favor. Now I'm sure you'd be grateful if you knew exactly when your place could get raided—right? Okay, would it be worth fifty bucks to know exactly when you might get raided?"

I had Ernie's attention.

"Okay, you stall this guy when he comes to collect and I will give you the exact time and date when you'll get hit. In fact, I'll give it to you right now," I told him.

We had a deal.

"It's about ten minutes before post time in the sixth at Gulfstream," I said, glancing at

my watch. "I want the fifty you're about to owe me to win on Gas City and you're due to be hit in about fifteen minutes."

I hung up the receiver.

"You want me to raid a bookie joint! Are you *nuts*?" Higgs raved. "That's the vice squad's job. I'm not even supposed to know where the damn places are!"

"Not exactly raid it. Just put in an appearance and I'll lay odds that you'll nab Sarkanian and Beanie both," I told him.

While Higgs and I argued, the tall, spare coroner was in a disjointed position on the dirty kitchen floor, examining Whitey's corpse.

"Three gunshot wounds all in the chest area. Looks like one of them ruptured the aorta from all this blood. Practically instantaneous death. I'll have my report for you in the morning."

"Of course he's dead, you idiot and I want that report *today*—not tomorrow!" Higgs screamed. "Another thing—get Sanitation to close this place for violation of the inside horsemanure ordinance or anything else you can think of!"

The gangling coroner was out of the kitchen in three strides. Higgs turned his sweet disposition back to me again, his gnomelike face about to regis-

ter a high blood-pressure fit. Why the little shrimp had never had a coronary attack was beyond me.

I took a quick check on the time. It was running out if we hoped to nab Sarkanian. I could only hope that the fat man would be convinced by Beanie to stop long enough to pick up the big guy's bet money before blowing town. All of this hinged on an old claiming horse winning his race and my ability to talk Higgs into action. It would be a day for longshots if I managed to pull this one off.

"I'm just going to explain this once. Then, if you're still too damn stupid to understand, I'll go after Sarkanian myself," I told Higgs. "I set Beanie up for this when I found out he was a horseplayer. I told him about this nag Gas City, and right away he knew the horse was an old claimer."

"What the hell does that prove?" Higgs asked.

I ignored his question and kept on talking. "I practically guaranteed Beanie that the horse would win today. Now Beanie had some time to kill before he tailed us out here because I stalled Sarkanian in my office. There's a bookie not fifty feet from my office, so all Beanie had to do was ask around the neighborhood.

"I checked with the bookie

6

before you got here and Beanie made his bet, so it's a cinch he'll stop and get his money. They're driving a light blue sedan and even you could spot Sarkanian; he looks like the back end of a Winnebago," I told Higgs.

"He'll stop to pick up a bet after being an accomplice to a murder?" Higgs wailed. "That's the most ridiculous idea I've heard yet. Besides, you don't even know if the damn horse won the race!"

Higgs' upper denture was hanging down and touching his lower lip. He looked like a mini-version of Dracula.

"Fine! You stay here like a dummy, and I'll go arrest the two of them. The Commissioner probably has a vacancy in the courthouse janitors' department for short warts like you. You could crawl through the air-conditioning ducts, dragging a mop tied to your butt, and win an ecology prize."

Higgs' upper plate fell out on the ground-dirty floor and broke into three pieces. He drop-kicked the largest chunk of pink acrylic in the direction of one of the pool tables. It wound up being a perfect two-rail bank shot.

"C'mon Wellth', get in the car," Higgs lisped. I directed him to Ernie Verdugo's betting parlor.

Gas City won the race at Gulfstream and Higgs won the race to Ernie's. Fat Freddy Votaw, alias Arthur Sarkanian, alias some other monikers was parked out front with the motor running. When Higgs handcuffed Fatso it looked like the Goodyear blimp being attacked by Super-Dwarf. I found Beanie inside with seventeen hundred dollars in his ham-hand; about to make another bet with Ernie.

"Take the money and go out the back way, Beanie. The cops have your fat friend out front," I advised him. I was giving him a break he didn't deserve, but somehow I didn't feel he was prison material. He gave me a broken-tooth grin and waved the greenbacks at me.

"You set me up pal, but not all the way. You remembered me from Latonia when I was Muckin' out stalls for Larry Frogde. I got a pretty good memory when I'm sober," he added in his odd-whispered voice.

Higgs went into a lisp-rage when he learned that Beanie had gotten away, but I didn't tell him anything and neither did Ernie. I've got a soft spot for old horseplayers. I may be one myself someday.

The pint-sized police captain wanted to take Ernie into custody on charges of running a

horse-parlor, but I managed to talk him out of it, pointing out that without Verdugo's aid in stalling Beanie we would never have grabbed the fat man.

For once, Higgs listened to reason.

"Thankth Wellsth' for the helpth," he told me. I peeled off a couple of hundreds from the

money I'd won on Gas City and stuck it in his suit-pocket.

"Get a new upper, for cryin' out loud," I told him. "You're beginning to sound like a gay midget."

Higgs turned red and then purple.

Would you believe his lower plate fell out?



Mystery Shifts Into High Gear With Every Issue of Mike Shayne

If you like mystery fiction with a police-file kind of authenticity, startling, unusual, by writers who are masters of their craft, you'll find your initials on the glove compartment of this month's MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, along with an X-marks-the-spot road map!

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HAL ELLSON

MARGARET MARON CARL HOFFMAN

by

JOHN LUTZ



DEATH BY THE NUMBERS

The "insurance" salesman gave Stone an option—pay up or else. But Stone liked money too well.

I SAW IN THE MORNING paper that the chief of police said that if the present crime rate continued, within the next three years one out of every five citizens could expect to be a victim. I couldn't get concerned.

My breakfast toast had burned slightly and the charred scent lingered, rather pleasantly, throughout my well-

furnished tenth floor condominium apartment. I walked into the modern, deep-carpeted living room with my third cup of strong black coffee. Yesterday had been my fifty-eighth birthday, and as I passed the mirror-tiled wall I glanced at my sallow but still handsome face. I laughed at my vanity. The doorbell chimed curtly,

as if to call time to my foolishness.

When I opened the door I was looking at a medium-height, broad shouldered man in his early thirties. I knew the type. He was wearing dark slacks and a checked sport coat with an elaborately knotted tie. He had thick black hair, strong dark eyes, strong white teeth and a high-voltage smile. He was high-voltage.

"Mr. Clark Stone?" he asked.

I said that I was.

His hand flicked out to give me a standard business card. When I glanced down at the card in that studiously poker-faced manner people use to glance at business cards, I saw that it was engraved with the words *Guarantee Insurance*.

"I'm Dan Bent," the man said, shaking my hand with firm intimacy. "You told me on the phone yesterday that ten o'clock would be all right."

I remember then that I had told him that yesterday, when my mind had been occupied with more important matters.

Bent pushed past me, still smiling, into the livingroom.

I shut the door and turned to face him as he sat down on the low-slung sofa and snapped open his leather attache case in a businesslike manner.

"I don't need any more insurance, Mr. Bent."

Bent had heard those words before. "You do," he said. "You just don't know it yet."

He was cheerfully determined. I decided maybe the simplest thing to do was to hear him out, then send him on his way. His healthy white smile widened as I sat in a chair opposite him. Outside the tall window I could see three or four distant gulls circling.

"What do you think of statistics, Mr. Clark?" Bent asked.

"I don't like them. They're the closest thing to astrology."

Bent's face glowed with the newly acquired morsel of wisdom found in that analogy. "I never thought of it quite that way, but statistics do have a way of foretelling our fate. And you're . . . let's see, fifty-eight yesterday—right?"

I said that was right.

"Get ready to die, Mr. Clark."

It was a sales gambit designed to startle, and it worked.

"Not in the near future, perhaps," Bent added. "But when you do go, what will you leave behind?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I haven't any relatives, any favorite charities." I considered offering Bent a cup of coffee, then decided that would only prolong his visit.

"Oh, we know how alone you are, sir. We also know your net worth. And we know how when

you were with Gem-Stone Jewelers as an active partner, jewelry of...questionable origin was made accessible to potential buyers."

I stood up, propelled out of my chair by surprise and anger. Bent was smiling a challenge to me now, letting me know he could easily handle whatever my reaction might be. He was probably right. I smiled, too.

"Our research department is as thorough as any," he said.

"Just what does Guarantee insure, Mr. Bent?"

"Why, we deal in life insurance. We insure that nothing fatal is likely to happen to you in the near future. At least not at Guarantee's hands."

I laughed. The shakedown was out in the open. "And if I don't buy the policy?"

"Then we insure that something will happen."

"So you're an extortionist and Guarantee phony company."

"Not at all," Bent said with an injured air. "We mainly sell legitimate life insurance policies. Call it a front, if you will. But if you go to the police and repeat what I've told you, the company and I are able to deny this part of the conversation and still account for our existence and my visit here. And as I said, Mr. Clark, we're very much aware of your background."

I sat staring at Bent, envying him. He was a man playing with his deck, someone else's money and all the chips.

"How much are the premiums?" I asked.

Bent studied something inside his open attache case. "Five thousand a year, half payable every six months. Not unreasonable, Mr. Clark."

"Guarantee must have a number of clients," I said, "to be able to be so reasonable."

Bent glanced up from the open case and nodded brightly. "Oh, more than you can imagine. It's all done by computer, both the legal and illegal ends of our business. Statistically, we were bound to get to you sooner or later, Mr. Clark. If projected over a long enough period, statistics are one of the few sure things in this world. Death, taxes and statistics."

"You're quite a believer in statistics, aren't you."

Bent nodded, displaying his wide white smile. "Because we lease our computer and its memory bank to certain parties, we have access to the facts surrounding a great many illegal transactions everywhere in the country."

"This hard information, when crossed with reliable personal information, invariably links names to transactions. The computer is then fed more in-

formation concerning the bearers of those names, furnished by our research department, and it prints out prospective clients on a selective basis."

He cocked his head, his smile gaining candlepower. "And here I am."

"Sounds efficient," I had to admit. "Now let me understand the proposition. The policy costs me five thousand dollars a year, half payable every six months. And if I *don't* buy the policy, who knows what could happen to me tomorrow?"

Bent nodded again. I expected him to say 'Guarantte knows,' but he didn't. Statistically, I was sure that few of his carefully researched 'clients' refused to buy the policy.

I ran my palms over my thighs to my knees and sighed, flicked at my pants leg creases. "How about a cup of coffee?" I asked.

"Thank you," Bent said. "Then we can settle the particulars, when and where to send the money, that sort of thing..."

He was all business, that one.

I went into the kitchen and rattled things around for a while.

When I returned, Bent was leaning forward on the low sofa, leafing through some papers in his attache case.

"Instant okay?" I asked.

"Fine," he said.

I walked up behind him and plunged my longest butter knife exactly between shoulder blades at an angle to the heart.

He sat up straight, turned and stared wide-eyed at me for that appalling breach of etiquette. His eyes asked me why, then they asked nothing and he slumped sideways on the sofa and started a gradual slide to the floor. The couch and carpet were ruined.

By the time you get this tape cassette at Police Heaadquarters I'll be...well, you'll find out where soon enough.

You see, Bent was right about statistics, but wrong in assuming they'd never catch up with him or Guarantee Insurance. Eventually the company was bound to approach someone like me, and the story could and would get out. I hadn't much choice, really.

I'd just been released from the hospital the day before, on my birthday. There was nothing more they could do, and with my medication I wasn't in any great pain. The doctors told me about the sort of cancer I had, how I could expect to live only a few more weeks, maybe not even that long.

What they were saying, when you boil away all the medical jargon, was that my number was up.

It is one hell of a shock to find that your wife has been beaten almost to death in your absence. But it's worse when you know the man who did it.

COMA VIGIL

by EDWARD WELLER



GRANT KNAPP DISREGARDED the *Staff Only* sign, shot his car into a restricted parking space, and rushed into the hospital. His feverish eyes sought out the information desk.

"Where's Mrs. Grant Knapp's room? She's my wife."

"Mrs. Knapp?" The name rang a bell. "One moment, sir." The woman's gaze flickered in impersonal pity and she signaled to a man sitting on a padded bench.

The man ground out a cigar stub, rose heavily, and came up to Knapp. "I'm Detective

McCann. You're Mr. Knapp? Let's step aside."

Knapp's eyes searched the detective's face for a clue. "All I want right now is to see for myself how my wife is."

"I'm a married man myself, so I know how you feel. I'll take you up in a minute."

Now the heavy hush and the sanitized smells hit Knapp. He swayed. McCann lifted a hand

toward him but Knapp had steadied himself.

"You all right, Mr. Knapp?"

Knapp shook his head impatiently, like a dog shaking off water. "I'm all right. It's my wife I'm worried about."

"I understand."

"No, you don't. Not unless you've had the same kind of shock. When I got home a few minutes ago I found the place bloody and ransacked. A cop told me they had taken my wife to this hospital."

"Yeah, I know. Walking in on a thing like that can be quite a wallop. We tried to get hold of you to break it to you before you got home. But your office said you were out."

Knapp nodded wearily. "That's right. I was on the road to do some selling." He gave a short laugh. "Though I might as well have stayed in the office." I got stuck in the tieup on the Freeway."

"Oh, yeah. I heard about that one. Bad, was it?"

"One of the worst I've been in. But how is my wife?"

McCann eyed him uncertainly. "Well, you see . . ."

"It's all right. I can take it."

"Well, the guy that did it beat up on her pretty good. But the worst part is the damage you can't see. She took a few bad blows to the head. So—no. She's not conscious." He hur-

ried on. "The doctors tell me that lots of times, in cases like your wife's, the victim can come out of the coma far enough to describe the perpetrator."

Knapp grew aware that his fingers were working. "I'd like to get my hands on—"

"I know, Mr. Knapp. But leave that to us. That's the job you citizens pay us for." McCann smiled slightly, then his face hardened. "Don't be taking the law into your own hands." The slight smile returned. "End of lecture."

McCann led Knapp into and out of an elevator, to a private room where a uniformed patrolman sat outside. The patrolman moved to stand up.

McCann waved him down. "Still the same?"

"Yessir."

McCann shook his head. He opened the door and ushered Knapp inside. He nodded to the nurse they found in the room. "No change?"

The nurse eyed Knapp sidelong. "No change."

She moved a folding screen out of the way. Knapp stepped forward. His wife lay mummylike under a clear plastic oxygen tent. A bottle dripped through a tube into her arm. She looked to him like a caterpillar in a silken cocoon. She lay terribly still. The nurse watched the dripping a mo-

ment, then took up an empty plasma bottle and, with a twitchily apologetic smile, slipped past and left the room.

McCann stepped to Knapp's side and touched him. "Look, there's no sense in your hanging around up here. You can't do her any good and there's not going to be any change for a long while."

He glanced at his watch. "We'll talk later about whether you have any ideas as to who might have done it. But right now, why don't you go down to the snack bar and have yourself a cup of coffee and a danish?" He looked wistful. "I'd join you but I have other things to do."

He marched the benumbed Knapp out of the room and past the officer at the door. The officer called McCann's name.

"Hold it a second, Mr. Knapp, While I see what he wants."

The two went into a low-voiced huddle. The patrolman said, "When's my relief coming? I'm dying for a smoke."

"Should be here on the hour. But if you can't hold out that long, go to the end of the corridor and lean out the window and take your puffs."

"Thanks, I will."

Shaking his head, McCann rejoined Knapp and steered him toward the elevator. "Like I was saying, try to take your mind off it. Or if you have to

think, think how you can help us find the perpetrator. I'll tell you right now, it looks to us like it had to be someone who knew his way around your house—delivery man, repairman, friend or neighbor.

"Someone who didn't want to leave her alive to tell. So if you happen to come up with any name, don't keep it to yourself with the idea of taking the law into your own hands. Let us know and we'll take it from there. Meanwhile, if it looks like there's any change, I'll see you're paged right away."

Knapp nodded. "Thanks." He gave McCann a wan smile.

McCann rode down with him to the main floor, pointed the way to the snack bar and left with a comforting squeeze of the shoulder. Knapp made for the snack bar.

He paused on the threshold. It pleased him to see the place swarm with visitors. No one would notice, whether he stayed or strayed. He moved into the room, passed up the counter, threaded through to the far exit.

He re-entered the hospital by the busy emergency entrance, striding as though he belonged. Again, no one questioned or noticed. He took the fire stairs up, stopping off at the first few till he hit what he wanted—an unintended supply room. He put

on a surgeon's gown, cap, gloves and mask, then climbed to his wife's floor.

The chair outside her door stood empty. The policeman lounged against the window sill at the other end of the corridor, smoking. As Knapp neared his wife's room, the officer turned to face him. Knapp watched him weigh the cigaret against the authoritative getup and remain at the window. Knapp nodded and the patrolman nodded back. Knapp went on in.

The nurse had not pulled the screen back into place around the bed. His wife lay in full view, helpless and unaware of her helplessness. Knapp shut the door behind him, moved quickly to bedside, reached under the plastic oxygen tent and pulled the pillow out from under her head.

Her head bounced. It seemed almost a nod of recognition.

He nerved himself to swift motion and savage pressure. He put his weight on the pillow, holding it over her nose and mouth, till the strain trembled his arms. He felt for his wife's pulse and found reassuring stillness. He dropped her hand.

She would never come back from the dead to tell the world she had nagged him just once too often about money. Now her death would stand as the work of someone she had surprised

ransacking the house. Once he replaced the pillow, it would appear she had merely stopped breathing.

As he lifted her head to slip the pillow back in place, he sensed movement behind him. He whirled, the pillow still in his hand.

The screen slid aside. McCann stood there. He held the cord of a patient's nurse-summoning button. His thumb lifted. The door opened. The officer stood there, hand ready to gun.

Knapp was barely aware of the cop frisking him and securing him till he felt the cold bite of handcuffs.

McCann pulled the surgical mask from his face. He looked at Knapp with eyes that had seen everything but that still held enough wonder left for sadness.

"So it's you. I thought it would be. But it could have been a delivery man or a repairman or, like I said, even a friend or a neighbor. So what we did was, we let word get around that your wife was likely to come to and talk. We hoped and prayed the guy would show up to try and shut her mouth for good—not knowing it was already shut."

Knapp's voice found itself. "Already shut for good?"

"Sure. She was dead on arrival."

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NOVEMBER, 1977

A Body Never Knows

by RUTH WISSMANN

The terror that had held the town in thrall was ended at last. The fiend who had strangled three of its women-folks was safely behind bars awaiting trial. But Jim Nichols still was not sure they had the right man.

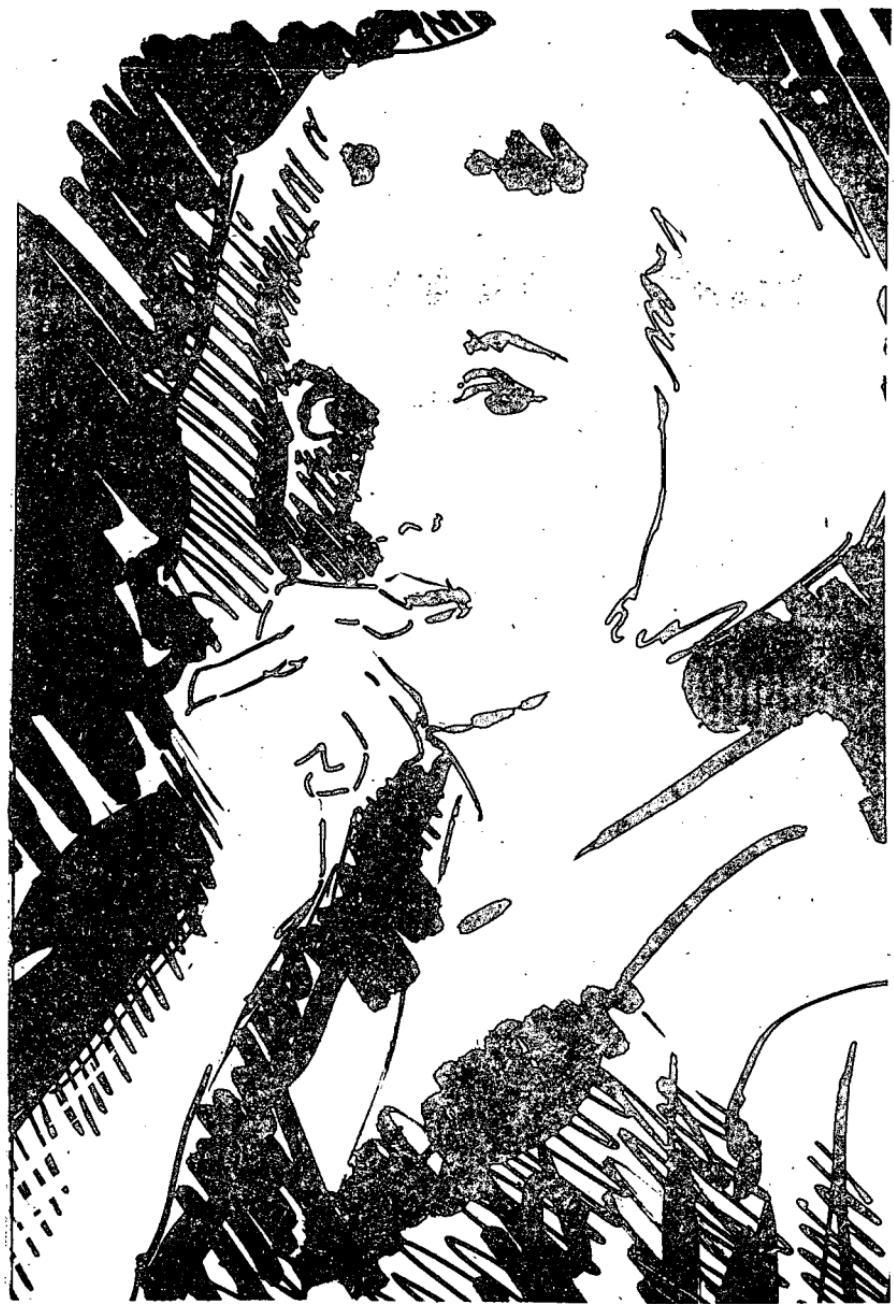
IT WAS A WARM EVENING, soft and fragrant with the scent of roses and honeysuckle and summer. There was no breeze and a stillness lay over the street of green lawns and picket fences and old houses containing small families. It was an ice cream street in a lemonade and cake kind of neighborhood, gossip-spiced and opinionated. It lay in a small town with a big problem, for three of its women had recently been robbed and strangled.

Tonight, however, the villagers felt at ease for the first time in weeks. Couples again strolled hand in hand, arm in

arm along the streets and into the shadows of the park. Porch swings were occupied once more and human voices accompanied the crisp chirruping of crickets. The tight and smothering weight of fear had been lifted, for Carl Snyder sat behind bars in the jail off Main Street, and the town could live normally again.

"No, Clara," Jim Nichols said as he sat on the top step leading to the front porch of the white frame house. "I don't think he's the one. I just don't think he did it."

"Of course he did," Jim's wife declared with a note of an-



noyance as she continued to knit and the needles kept time with the crickets. Long ago, Jim had stopped wondering how his wife could knit in the dark. She even took her knitting with her when they occasionally went to see a movie at the Isis on Main Street, and she didn't drop a stitch or miss a scene or line of dialogue.

Clara Nichols was one of those women who seldom seemed to miss anything. Her eyes were sharp as the needles, and her mind contained a neat up-to-date file, a remarkable record of all the residents in Markersville, where they lived, what they did and why.

"The sheriff knows," she said. "Malcolm Gourney has a head on his shoulders."

"The kid could be innocent, Clara."

"He's no kid," she told him. "He's thirty-two years old and a stranger in town."

"And that's all they have on him," her husband said, "his being a stranger. Just because he's new in town. Just because he's not acquainted and not working."

Clara frowned and felt a cool and unadmittedly delightful little shiver walk along her spine. "I wish you wouldn't talk about it," she said. "It's all too terrible—what he did. Just terrible. When I think that he

strangled poor Mrs. Banks and Miss Mathews and Rose O'Meara... I was telling Ethel just this morning that— Well, never mind. We simply should not talk about it."

She sat stiffly now, her fingers quiet, the needles silent, as she looked warily toward the large mounds alongside the fence that were the lilac bushes.

Then she held her breath. Something had moved, or was it her imagination? No. No, a tall lean figure walked on the far side of the fence. It was probably Ethel Parker's son, Buddy. Clara had never liked that boy, and a wave of uneasiness washed over her. He was a sneak, she told herself, and had probably been listening to every word she and Jim said.

"Sheriff Gourney doesn't have any *real* evidence against that kid," Jim was saying thoughtfully.

"It was horrible," Clara said while ignoring his words, "that never knowing when a body got up in the morning that it might be for the very last time."

"He looks like such a clean-cut kid. Pleasant. I just have trouble believing—"

"A body never knows," she said. "Poor Rose O'Meara. Chipper little person. Always smiling and showing her dimples when she met folks at

church or at the Woman's Club. Little did she know that—"

"Simple. She was kind of simple-minded, I thought. Always grinning," he said.

"Well—she shouldn't have kept all her money in the house. *That* wasn't showing very good sense," Clara admitted. "And I don't think she ever locked a door in her life. That Snyder must have walked right in, murdered her and took every cent she had. But then, she knew no one in this town would rob her. Yes, our sheriff was right to arrest Carl Snyder. Most folks are quick to suspect strangers and rightly so. This case just proves it."

Clara nodded now, set her lips decisively and picked up her knitting. "We know everyone else hereabouts, and we know it couldn't have been *anybody* but someone new in town."

But could it? She found herself wondering as she heard a screen door slam and Ethel call from next door, "Is that you, Buddy?"

"There's something wrong," Jim muttered stubbornly, as he reached up to the porch railing and hit his pipe sharply against it several times to remove the burnt tobacco.

"I've told you a thousand times not to do that," Clara snapped. "Messy habit."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of crimp cut and began to fill the pipe again, tamping it down into the bowl just right—not too firmly or it wouldn't draw. Jim was a perfectionist. Everything had to be exact.

"The parts don't fit together," he said, still thinking of the man in jail. "There's something missing."

Clara shook her head with a sense of hopelessness as she watched him strike a match and saw the flame rise and fall while he held it to the pipe and drew upon it.

"Mrs. Lewis at the boarding house feels that it's all her fault. If she just hadn't rented a room to that Snyder, then all this wouldn't have happened. They'd still be alive and with us, Rose O'Meara and Miss Mathews and Mrs. Banks." Clara's eyes became saddened with the thought of them.

"Mrs. Banks wasn't too bright either," Jim commented and watched the fireflies hovering in the air over his well-kept lawn. Too bad it wasn't always summer, he thought. No snow to shovel. No furnace to fuss with.

"Mrs. Lewis said if she hadn't let that stranger have a room, he might have moved on, over to Bentley or somewhere." Clara sighed with resignation.

"And murdered three women over there?" Jim asked.

"Well—" Clara shifted with discomfort. "Well, at least we can now sleep peacefully again—the first time in over two months. Now we won't be waking up every hour or so—scared."

"I wish I could feel as certain about all this as most folks do," Jim said as though speaking to himself, "but I just can't get this bug out of my mind that he's not guilty. I can't help but wonder." He shook his head slowly. "The gears don't mesh," he insisted and the crickets seemed to fall silent to listen for his voice.

"Forget it. You're seldom right about anything," Clara said matter-of-factly. "Always doubting other people's opinions. Always have and always will. Look at those clouds moving across the sky. It's going to rain."

He looked up at the gray masses gathering over the moon. This was the way people were going to gather for a town meeting here in Markersville if that stranger had not been arrested. Plans had been taking form. People were angry and wanted action.

Jim was thinking of this as he said, "They don't even have good circumstantial evidence. They don't even have the

money. Where's the money?" he asked.

"He hid it, naturally," Clara replied derisively. "Do you think he'd go around town with his pockets stuffed?"

"Well, all I can say is I don't think we should drop our guard. We should be alert. We should *keep* our doors locked."

Clara frowned at the moon. The crickets began to chirp again and after a moment she said, "Of course, you just *might* be right. *Anything's* possible, I suppose. A body never knows."

Not without a touch of apprehension did Clara curl up in her bed that night. Long after Jim was asleep she was still lying there listening. From somewhere came the hoot of an owl, and through the tall window she watched curtains of clouds lower themselves comfortably over the town.

What if Jim *was* right for once in his life? She asked herself. What if the strangler *did* still lurk near the bushes and trees and houses of Markersville?

She turned from her side to her back and stared at the shadowed ceiling while telling herself that Jim had never been right about anything, actually, except how to repair motors. The ball teams he bet on always lost.

At the Fair, he could never

win a thing—not a stuffed animal nor a souvenir plate nor a pumpkin pie. He was a born loser. Why—if she hadn't inherited this house and a tidy nest egg... That job of his at the garage was... She shrugged and finally slept.

The following afternoon, she ventured out into the back yard with a cautiousness that irritated her and in turn made her annoyed with Jim. When Ethel Parker leaned over the fence and called to her, Clara jumped.

"Oh!" she cried, startled, and wondered when she would ever again cease to be so jumpy. "Hello, Ethel. You're looking well."

"Of course. Isn't it a wonderful feeling? I slept like a baby last night. Oh, what a blessed relief!"

"I had a few qualms," Clara admitted. "Jim's fault. He just isn't convinced that Malcolm Guerney has the right man."

Ethel laughed softly and shook her head. "Of course he's the right man. *Everybody* knows that. I slept like a baby," she said again. "I didn't wake up once during the night. Not once."

"I heard thunder," Clara told her, "Around one o'clock this morning we had a light rain. I heard it. I was—listening."

"I've heard we may not get to

have the trial here," Ethel said. "They say if this Carl Snyder is wanted elsewhere for murder he might be extradited. Buddy said, that we should, by rights, have it here so the townsfolk could be on the jury and see that this killer got hanged."

"Did he now?" Clara asked and, thinking of Buddy, felt suddenly chilled.

"Yes. And Buddy said he should be hanged in every state where he's committed murder," Ethel added. "Horrible thought, isn't it?"

Clara nodded, thinking that this was exactly the sort of thought that Buddy would have, however. There was something about that boy. "It's a horrible thought," she said, "especially if the man's innocent."

"Oh, *Clara!* You know how Jim always takes an opposing view of nearly everything. Just like the school bonds that he wanted passed when they shouldn't have been. And then there was that Arnold Peabody, who embezzled the money from the construction company and then skipped to Mexico. What does your Jim think that man is living on down there? Beans?"

Clara looked at a row of bright nasturtiums and thought about last winter, when Jim suggested they leave the cold

and go to Mexico or some warm foreign country. He was a good man, but impractical.

"Rose O'Meara can never be brought back to life even if we string up her killer," Ethel was saying as she swatted a mosquito. "Her smile is gone forever," she added in a funereal tone of voice. "And Mrs. Banks—you know, Clara, she never should have gone around town flashing those big bills."

I think she just did it to remind everyone that she and Ray always had enough money to travel all over the world. Have you noticed that she's been kind of peculiar ever since he passed away? Odd. And according to Buddy, she was seen speaking to Carl Snyder one day on Elm Street. Featherbrained. Yes, Alma Banks had been different ever since she became a widow."

"I think," Clara said, "that poor Ray Banks probably picked up one of those foreign bugs, you know, that we have no resistance to. Now, whenever Jim gets itchy feet and talks about trotting off to other places, I just remind him of what happened to Ray."

"Clara, is something wrong in your house with the plumbing? Is that sink of yours stopped up again?" Ethel asked as she looked questioning toward the street.

"Why, no. Whatever makes you think that—"

"Just saw ol' Pete Sims's truck pull up in front out there. Maybe he has the wrong house again. He never gets the phone messages straight. He's getting a little peculiar. He has an odd way of staring at a person. Noticed that? Creepy. Kind of creepy."

Clara swallowed with difficulty. She had noticed the man's eyes, and now she was wondering if her front screen door was locked. He always came to the front like company, she was thinking as she hurried back into the house and felt her heart beginning to beat faster. When she reached the living room she found the man's face pressed so hard against the screen that it was distorted and somehow monstrous.

"Hi, Mrs. Nichols. It's me."

"Yes, Mr. Sims. I know," she breathed.

"Tub's stopped up. Right?"

"No. No, it isn't. Sorry you had to bother."

"It must be. I got a call that it was. Better let me check it while I'm here. How's the sink working?"

A prickly sensation spread over the back of Clara's neck as the large eyes and pressed face peered into the house at her. "Everything's just fine. Just—

working—fine," she managed to say.

"Mmmm, that's mighty funny," he said suspiciously. "Someone called me and said to come right over here because the tub was all gummed up. I was sure it was you. Sounded just like you."

Clara took a deep breath of thankfulness that the hook on the screen was locked. "I—I wasn't the one who made the call," she said uncertainly as she reached for the wooden door to close it. "You have the wrong house, Mr. Sims."

"Sure you don't want me to check the drains while I'm here?" he asked.

"No, thank you. They're all unclogged, I'm sure."

"Guess you're glad they caught the strangler," he said as his flattened lips opened into a kind of grin. "We can all rest easy now. Well, better mosey back to the shop, I guess, and wait for that woman to call again. Sure sounded like you. Sure *did*."

As he drove away, Clara felt a weakness in her knees and sank down into a nearby chair. For the first time she, wondered if it could be possible Jim was right, then reminded herself sternly that he never was.

When Jim came home for dinner she looked at him questioningly and then shook



her head. "Go wash your hands," she said. "Why didn't you put the car away?"

"Because I wanted you to come out to the driveway and listen to the motor. I've got that engine purring just like a kitten. Quietest thing you ever heard. I had lots of time to work on it today. There wasn't much doing at the garage. Folks are too busy hanging around street corners talking to think about their cars."

"Talking about what?" she

asked and wondered about the smug smile on his face.

"The murders. What else? And—that Carl Snyder being in jail."

"Oh?"

"Yep. I just wanted you to know that this here town's divided. Some folks are thinking the same way I am now. They're beginning to wonder if Snyder *is* the wrong man. There's a lot of talk going on. Appears to be a storm brewing."

Clara stared at him with mouth agape. Jim thought for a moment that Clara resembled a carp he had caught in the river three weeks ago.

"How could anyone think he is innocent?" she asked. "I do wish they wouldn't keep things stirred up. Just when we feel safe again, then people—like you for instance—begin to make everyone feel nervous and scared again. Go wash your hands."

"I told you, Clara, they don't have anything on him. At least, not enough."

"But they *do*!" she insisted. "He was seen talking to Miss Mathews before she drew her money out of the bank. And Mrs. Lewis said he walked through the park all the time and knew Mrs. Banks always went home that way with her purse crammed to overflowing.

"And Jack Campbell at the grocery said that Pearl said that Mickey told her that his mother saw the stranger strolling along the very street where Rose O'Meara lived. Just at dusk, it was, and on the same night she was murdered."

"Okay. Okay," he said as he went to the kitchen sink to wash. "Just wanted you to know that I'm not the only person in town who thinks that—"

"It's the weather," she said determinedly. "Folks are edgy when it gets so hot and humid. They find fault. They want to argue."

"I know. I know. That's right. After supper I want to take you for a spin around the block, so you can hear the engine. Quiet as a kitten."

"Some other time," she said. "I'm tired. I did a lot of cleaning around here today."

"You should hire someone to help you once in a while."

"No, no. We should save our money for our old age. We might live to be a hundred," she said and then thought, *if we don't get murdered first.* "Eat your supper. Oh! I nearly forgot. This is your lodge night. You don't want to be late, you know."

"I don't care. It's kind of a bore."

"Well, you go anyway. It's good for you to be around those

men. Some of Markersville's oldest and best families are represented there. Good roots. I like the feeling of having good solid roots planted here."

"Suppose I should go," he said, "but to tell you the truth, I don't think any woman in this town should be left alone until we know for sure about Snyder. I'm telling you, Clara, there other folks are beginning to think the same way I do. I'm not the only one who's wondering if Snyder's guilty."

Clara frowned as she thought again of Peter Sims' face pressed against her screen door. She took a deep breath in preparation to admitting, although reluctantly, that perhaps Jim *should* stay here with her. But he was saying, "I'll go, since it means so much to you, Clara, but you keep the doors locked. Okay?" She nodded stiffly.

A short time after nine o'clock, Clara went to bed with the firm intention of staying awake and knitting until Jim's return. But sleep overtook her, and an hour later she awoke with a sense of uneasiness.

A noise—surely a sound had awakened her. Glancing toward the clock, she saw that it was too early for Jim to be coming home. Seldom did the meetings break up before ten-thirty. She held her breath and listened.

There *was* a sound! A soft

and stealthy one. Clara rose stiffly to a sitting position, swallowed with difficulty. Her heart hammered. Someone was mounting the stairs, she realized, as she peered into the darkness.

"Jim?" she tried to call out, but her voice was only a dry whisper. "Jim, is that you?"

Clara put a trembling hand over her lips and her eyes became enormous as terrifying thoughts flashed through her mind. Good God! Was it possible that Jim had been right?

Silently, she slipped from her bed. Wildly, her eyes turned toward the window and the strong trellis beside it. Here was her only chance of escape, she knew, but an icy terror gripped her, turning her bones to icicles and her flesh to marble. Clara Nichols could not move until a dark form seemed to fill the doorway, and it was almost a reflex action that made her reach for her knitting.

She believed she screamed, but was not sure as she sprang toward the door and thrust one long steel needle into the man who stood there. As he fell forward she screamed again. It was then she heard him speak the last words he would ever say.

"Came home early—to tell you—Snyder—confessed.

THE DECISION

Harry figured only the blonde was stacked. But when the showdown came there was a joker in the deck.

by CARROLL MEYERS



HARRY CASINO SELDOM wavered in making up his mind. As regional director of the Organization's entire East Coast operations, Harry's actions and reactions habitually were quick and positive, rarely revoked. Tonight, though with an impending confrontation due in less than half an hour, a nagging uncertainty he had fought all day still gripped him. He paced the posh apartment with short, jerky strides, stubbing a cigarette he had fired only a moment past.

Joyce Jensen, the blonde lovely from the club downstairs who was Harry's favored filly for the present, regarded him from the divan. "Something wrong, Harry?"

He made a vague gesture. "No. Everything's fine."

"You sure?" Casino pressed.
"I'm sure."

Her green eyes were shrewd. "I mean, you seem upset —"

Harry swore softly. Dammit, this was a nice kid, and more than generous with her favors, but she could be pushy — pushy and nosy. He didn't like that. Nobody called the shots for Harry Casino, least of all a dame.

"I said everything's okay," he told her. "I've just got something to work out. Go down to the club for an hour, then come back."

Harry broke it off as the apartment door buzzer echoed, frowned as he checked his watch.

Leaving as instructed, Joyce paused as she admitted the visitor. "Hello, Vince."

Vince Parsons was a lean individual in his late twenties, with the freshly scrubbed and neatly suited appearance of a junior business executive. Only his eyes, pale blue and utterly expressionless, suggested otherwise.

"Hi, doll," he greeted Joyce.

Harry's frown held. "You two know each other?"

"We've met in the club," Parsons said casually, turning to assess the girl's trim hips as she departed.

The appraisal was not lost on Harry, but he made no issue of it. For his part, if the young man sensed his host's awareness of his interest in the girl it did not appear to disconcert him.

Harry cranked that realization through his mind, adding it to the data he'd already considered. Parsons was cocky. Not insolently so, but cocky just the same. Maybe *too* sure of himself?

Parsons settled on the divan, lighted a fresh cigarette. "You wanted to see me, Chief?"

I didn't say he should sit down, Harry told himself, but again he let the detail ride, took an opposite lounge chair. He was a dark-visaged man in his mid-fifties with fleshy jowls, strong white teeth. "I did, Vince," he said deliverately. "At eight o'clock."

Parsons' small smile was apologetic. "I just happened to hit the club a little early, thought I might as well come on up."

Harry said, "I figured that. The point is, when I say eight o'clock, I don't mean twenty minutes of."

Parsons blinked, started a rejoinder, then fell silent, returning Harry's level look. After a long moment, he said, "It's more than that, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. "A bit more, Vince. You've done some good work for us, yes. But you're too independent. You want to move up too fast. You don't follow orders, which is why you fouled up the Reiker contract. The Organization doesn't like that. *I* don't like it."

Parsons flushed. "I still made the Reiker hit and I walked away from it. The cops couldn't hold me."

"But you didn't walk away clean," Harry countered. "You made waves, got the Organization into the news when you shouldn't have."

Parsons continued to return Harry's tight gaze. "Just what are you telling me?"

Harry said, "I'm telling you to back off. Stay in line. Follow orders."

Parsons' color deepened. "Or else?"

Harry leaned forward in his

chair. "You said that, Vince," he said simply. "I didn't."

The muscles of Parsons' lean jaw twitched. Abruptly, he shoved from the divan. "All right," he blurted. "All right! So I was wrong."

Harry made no further amplification. After another taut moment, Parsons asked, "Is there anything else?"

Harry shook his head. "That's it for now."

The young man gave his superior a final hard look, then strode stiff-legged to the door, was gone.

Harry resumed pacing the apartment, but now his strides were more disciplined, his manner relaxed to a degree. The confrontation was over, everything said that could have been said. Now the decision was up to him, to pass along to another cold-eyed hireling who at this moment was standing by, awaiting Harry's call.

Plus versus minus was what it all boiled down to. As Harry had acknowledged, Vince Parsons was adept in his trade, had served the Organization well in the past, and could well do so in the future. Also, in itself, the young man's ambition and drive hardly could be faulted. It was only human nature to want to get ahead.

Still, ambition had to be regimented, particularly when

fueled by a cocky self-assurance. Left unchecked, who could deny that Parsons' obsession for recognition and advancement might not some day trigger a monumental foul-up, needlessly jeopardize the top rung echelon of the Organization?

Plus and minus. Dispassionately, Harry marshalled the factors, weighing, considering. Finally, he moved to the phone, dialed. When the connection was made, Harry drew a breath, spoke several succinct sentences without preamble, then hung up.

Once he had issued the order, Harry put the matter out of his mind. He build himself a gin and tonic at a compact cellorette, determined to unwind, enjoy the rest of the evening. Abruptly, he realized well over and hour had passed and Joyce Jensen had not returned as he had instructed.

Irritation flickered in Harry's dark eyes. He went to the phone again, called the club downstairs and gave word that the girl be sent up immediately.

An additional quarter hour passed before Joyce made her appearance. Smiling, Harry took her wrist, led her to the divan. "I said an hour, kitten, remember?"

She was contrite. "I'm sorry,

Harry. I got interested in something else."

He didn't release her wrist. "Something or somebody?" he suggested. "Like Vince Parsons?" Still smiling, he gave the girl's arm a savage twist.

Joyce yelped in pain, wrenched her wrist free. "Suppose I *was* talking to him?" she demanded. "You don't own me!"

Harry sighed. "I'm not interested in semantics."

Her green eyes blazed. "I'll talk to Vince all I want!"

Harry's tone picked up an edge. "Lower your voice," he told her.

"I *won't!*" she said. "You can't make me."

He shoved her down upon the divan. "I can make you, kid," he said. "Believe me, I can make you."

Joyce continued to glare at him. Suddenly, her expression changed, her ripe lips quirked into a sneer. You're jealous of Vince Parsons, aren't you, Harry?" she threw at him. "When you learned I might be favoring him, too, you couldn't take it."

Harry said tightly, "Don't tell me what I can't take—"

She was openly scorning him now. "Maybe it's more than jealousy," she taunted. "Maybe you're secretly afraid of Vince, afraid of how young blood that's

really put out for the Organization might threaten your authority, might even take over your spot. It could be that's why you had him up here tonight, to feel him out. Maybe you've already given the word on him!"

Harry slapped her twice, stinging blows that snapped her head around.

Joyce sprang to her feet, eyes stormy. "You'll be sorry for that!" she cried. "I swear, you'll be sorry!" Then, tears welling up, she fled from the apartment.

Breathing hard, Harry balled his fists. Cheap little tramp sounding off that way to him. She was the one who'd be sorry.

Of an instant, he laughed. Broads like Joyce were a dime a dozen. All he had to do was pick up the phone.

Harry relaxed then, made himself another drink, turned down the room lights and stretched out on the divan. It had been a long day...

He must have dozed off. Consciousness returned with the snick of a switch which brought into power twin table lamps at either end of the divan.

Batting his eyes at the glare, Harry sat up — and froze. Vince Parsons was standing before the divan, studying him with bleak impassivity. And young Parsons had a gun in his

fist, an ugly .38 automatic.

Harry choked. "W-what is this — ?"

The gun jerked. "This," Parsons said thinly, "is my own personal contract, Casino. Thanks to you, I probably won't make it through the night, but you'll be ahead of me."

Harry's mind exploded. Joyce Jensen, that vindictive, conniving little floozie was responsible for this! In retaliation for those slaps, she had sought out Parsons, told him her suspicion about Harry giving the word for Parsons' wipeout. And Parsons had managed to slip back here —

Harry struggled to his feet, bleated, "No, Vince — "

The .38 leveled. Nausea flooded Harry. He tried to declaim the truth — that the girl had been wrong, that, yes, he had considered Parsons' elimination but had decided against it, that the decision he'd finally reached had been to give the young killer another chance with the Organization . . .

But Harry's throat constricted at recognition of the grim purpose in Parsons' cold eyes and the words wouldn't come. Then the .38 exploded and the slug tore into Harry's heart.

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